

High Country News

A person wearing a white t-shirt and a black tactical vest is shown from the chest down. They are holding a black AR-15 style rifle with a tan handguard and a large black lens cap. A tan magazine with an American flag design is visible. A yellow flag with a green and black emblem and the text "DON'T TREAD ON ME" is attached to the vest. The vest has several patches, including one that says "IN GOD WE TRUST" and another that says "★MOASMA BE★".

INFECTIOUS IDEOLOGIES

A Patriot militia
movement push

Evangelical
conspiracists

Albuquerque
militias

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Enchanted Mesa in New Mexico, home to the original Acoma Pueblo settlement. **Tom Till**

Know the West.

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Where people are stepping up

EACH DAY LATELY has been like waking in an alternate reality. The United States has become a country where facts are optional, face masks are political, and climate change is a hoax. In this issue, we explore conflicting realities and spreading ideologies, and we offer several stories of cooperation and hope.

The past decade has been a boon for the West's militia movement, but with the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter uprising, "Patriots" are making a recruitment push. Where concerned citizens assemble to protest state violence, police brutality and white supremacy, militia members have also appeared, armed and dangerous. Amid the pandemic, similar groups have sought to provide services, from security to food distribution, eroding the legitimacy of the government. The pandemic has also brought on warnings of plagues and conspiracy theories. Dangerous ideas are spreading in a moment of national confusion.

At another scale, the dismissal of climate warnings by national leadership has left the country ill-prepared for what is coming. The lengthening wildfire season is straining firefighters, causing post-traumatic stress that our health system cannot handle. To make matters worse, our poor response to COVID-19 has brought a massive economic downturn, including for the renewable energy sector. We are entering negative feedback loops.

In a fragmenting world, we must work harder to connect. Where systems fail, individuals can step up. To give one example: COVID-19 economics are presenting a housing challenge in the San Francisco Bay Area, which was already experiencing severe economic pressure and gentrification. There, though, citizens are pushing for policies that help them buy buildings, so that people can stay in their homes. To give another: In Washington, where the pandemic is disrupting food distribution, people are learning to grow their own food and supply their neighbors.

A similar kind of cooperation was essential, too, for the recent return of a ceremonial shield to the Pueblo of Acoma. As Contributing Editor Elena Saavedra Buckley reports in this issue, the shield was stolen from the tribal nation decades ago, only to appear for auction in Paris. Through steadfast pursuit by and cooperation between Acoma leaders and U.S. investigators, the shield came home. It was a major win for the Acoma, and also proof that there are still good people out there, willing to do good work. In this splintered, confusing time, such goodwill goes a long way.

Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

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After a ceremonial shield stolen from the Pueblo of Acoma showed up in a Paris auction house, it took years to unravel the mystery of its loss and to bring it back home.

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Danny Brown and his son, Lear, and daughter, Tatum, work on a friend's ranch outside Bonanza, Oregon. Brown, a former wildland firefighter for the Bureau of Land Management, has never recovered from losing a close friend in a fire (above).

Michael Hanson / HCN

Blaise Sullivan works for Washington's Jefferson Land Trust and is part of the local and organic food movement on the Olympic Peninsula (right).

Brooke Warren / HCN



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Members of the Patriot militia movement watched the March for Our Rights 3 in Olympia, Washington. **Jason Redmond / HCN**

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LETTERS

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

YAQUI CATFISH

The July feature story, “Fish Out of Water,” has everything: colonization’s long-term effects, the ridiculously destructive border wall, the environmental costs of human habitat, the imminent loss of a species that lasted millions of years, and so much more.

Jennifer Taw, via Twitter

“Fish Out of Water” by Maya Kapoor, is a great (sad, beautiful, thoughtful) story.

Vicky Stein, via Twitter

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the border wall construction in Arizona continues at a breakneck pace, using local #water to spray down dusty roads and mix concrete, with a devastating impact on #wildlife, too, including the Yaqui catfish.

Fred Page, via Twitter

AMERICAN VIOLENCE

To provide some historical framing for current socio-political happenings, look to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s “Armed and contagious” in the June issue. When things don’t make sense, dig into history to find out why.

Alan-Michael Weatherford, via Twitter

“Armed and contagious” is an interesting article. The culling of human beings is what I am heartbroken about — our old, our houseless, our vulnerable.

Natalie Hirt, via Twitter

Author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz offers an interesting point of view on the armed reopen “protests.” from an interesting point of view. It’s a chilling analysis that sums up three centuries and their original sins: guns, profits and a culture of privilege. Maybe a tad bit radical, but it makes you think.

Jürgen Kraus, via Twitter

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE POLICE

For anyone in Seattle who is interested in City Councilmember Andrew Lewis’s proposal to create a mental health response unit similar to Eugene’s CAHOOTS program, Anna V. Smith did a very good, detailed report on this in the June issue of *High Country News* (“Experts in de-escalation”).

Andrew Engelson, via Twitter

#BLACKBIRDERS

OMG: I love this (“#BlackBirdersWeek takes on racism,” June 2020). Bird nerds are my people. Come on in.

Jason White, via Facebook

Concerning Emily Benson’s interview with Sheridan Alford in “BlackBirdersWeek takes on racism”: This is how we show up as allies. We need to welcome everyone to enjoy the peace and nature of America’s great outdoors. #outdoorsforall #diversityoutdoors #access4all

Poppy Davis, via Twitter

LEADERS HAVE LOST THEIR WAY

In Jim Kenna’s “Perspective” piece in the July issue, “Bureau of Lost Management,” the phrase “have lost their way” implies that the same people who did the right thing before now have lost their way. It also implies that the entire designed and carefully executed strategy to replace federal employees with this administration’s shady debris was not actually a plan to take over the Bureau of Land Management. Not making this loudly clear is the first failing of this story, no matter its original intent.

Stellina Giannitsi, via Facebook

My thanks to Jim Kenna for his a well-written explanation of the current situation at the Bureau of Land Management in “Bureau of Lost Management” (June 2020). I spent almost 35 years with the BLM. As in the past, most employees work for the people and the land. Many of the public view the employees as adversaries. Don’t be afraid to talk to them and ask about your concerns.

Terry Loyer, via email

COLORADO WOLVES

Belatedly discovering Ethan Linck’s feature story, “Throwing Wolves to the Vote,” in the March 2020 issue leaves me with a sense of unease as his discussion of the pros and cons of scientific justification versus activist promotion of the forthcoming legislative initiative for deciding whether wolves should be reintroduced in Colorado. Although I generally agree with Linck’s arguments and conclusions, he largely misses an issue of critical concern to many eminent conservation biologists, namely, the degradation and destruction of the complex “web of life” worldwide due to self-serving human activity, especially in the modern era in which destructive capabilities have greatly increased. As was recognized in passage of the Endangered Species Act, any and all species have intrinsic values, both ecologically and culturally, even though all consequences resulting from preservation of an individual species may be difficult to ascertain. An essential role of responsible publications such as *High Country News* is to expose cultural inequities, commercial and/or associated governmental malfeasance, and especially to educate the general public as regards the deeper issues of conservation biology and cultural diversity.

**Doyle McClure
Dolores, Colorado**

“When things don’t make sense, dig into history to find out why.”

Turning back gentrification

As the economy weakens, tenant protections gain traction.

BY NICK BOWLIN

IN THE SUMMER OF 2019, Elizabeth Bell's apartment building in San Francisco's Mission District went up for sale, and real estate agents were soon giving tours to prospective developers. As fear of eviction or rent hikes sank in, Bell, 74, started getting heart palpitations. Her apartment was cheap, rent-controlled, a necessity for Bell, who supplements her Social Security with gig-translation work to make ends meet. There's a rail stop less than two blocks away — useful, because Bell does not bicycle as easily as she used to. And she loves the place, which has a “beautiful arch over the front door” with cracked stained glass above the frame. The other residents are a diverse mix — longtime Latino families, one with a disabled son; low-income seniors like Bell; a young couple. All depend on rent control to live in the Mission, the historic home of San Francisco's Latino community, now riven by some of the city's most intense gentrification.

If forced to leave, Bell knew she could not afford to stay in San Francisco, where she has lived since 1975. “I am very bonded to the city, she said in an interview. “I don't know where I would pick up and start again at this point in my life.”

To save the building, she and other tenants contacted housing advocates, who eventually introduced them to the Mission Economic Development Agency

(MEDA), a longtime Bay Area nonprofit. Over the past few years, MEDA has emerged as a leader in an anti-gentrification effort, known as a “right-to-purchase” policy, in which local nonprofits obtain residential buildings to prevent development and displacement. The average income of residents in properties acquired by MEDA is more than 30% lower than the area's median income. Prior to the COVID-19 economic downturn, the average rent for a one-bedroom in San Francisco was \$3,360 a month, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported. To date, MEDA has acquired 32 buildings (more than 250 units), with two more on the way.

This and other tenant-protection policies are spreading across California. The COVID-19 downturn caused unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression, and experts fear a housing crisis will follow. San Francisco's city council recently passed an eviction ban. Oakland and Berkeley had already introduced their own right-to-purchase policies pre-coronavirus, both of which gained urgency after the pandemic hit. Los Angeles extended eviction protections through the summer and, spurred by COVID-19, is considering its own right-to-purchase policy. And in late June, a bill was introduced in the California Legislature that would create a statewide version



Elizabeth Bell poses for a portrait in her apartment in San Francisco's Mission District, where she has lived since 2004. When the building went on the market last year, Bell says she and other tenants feared they would be evicted.

Christie Hemm Klok / HCN

of the policy.

MEDA bought Bell's building in February, just as COVID-19 was beginning to surge in the Bay Area. In addition to financial peace of mind, the purchase allowed Bell, whose age puts her at heightened risk for coronavirus, to remain in her home. Doctors never determined the cause of her palpitations, she said, “but I can tell you, I do not have them anymore.”

The enormous loss of wealth for, and displacement of, low-income and Black and Latino families after the 2008 financial crisis convinced MEDA staff that they needed new and better tools “for when the next financial crisis comes,” Johnny Oliver, an organizer for the group, said. As properties foreclosed, developers bought them and turned them into high-end condos. Oliver described MEDA's work as “revers-

ing gentrification in the Mission District,” which has been transformed by years of unrestrained housing development and speculation. The Latino population in the Mission has shrunk by nearly 30% — a conservative estimate, given the challenge in counting undocumented people — over the past two decades

Abetting this displacement is a California law called the Ellis Act. A powerful driver of gentrification, the Ellis Act allows landlords to evict entire buildings of tenants before selling a property. The new properties become condos or tenancy-in-common flats, or TICs, a housing designation that allows buyers to purchase a percentage of the property. The rise of TICs in San Francisco is associated with the Silicon Valley tech boom. Cash-

(continued on page 21)

The thin blurred line

Police in New Mexico have long flirted with radical right-wing vigilantism.

BY KALEN GOODLUCK

IN MID-JUNE, ON A SUNNY late afternoon, dozens of protesters led by Indigenous and youth organizers gathered in front of the Albuquerque Museum at the feet of *La Jornada*, a statue of Spanish conquistador Don Juan de Oñate. They called for the statue's removal, saying it was a monument to a genocidal colonial history. On the outer banks of the crowd, at least six militiamen from the New Mexico Civil Guard, a civilian militia, flanked the protest in a tight semicircle, some of them shouldering semi-automatic rifles.

When some of the protesters began taking a pickaxe and chain to the statue, a man in a blue shirt — later identified as Steven Baca Jr. — began shoving protesters. Then he threw a woman to the ground. Her head hit the pavement with an audible smack and Baca fled, discharging a cloud of pepper spray on the protesters trailing him, shouting at him to leave. Baca turned to face a man in jeans and a black hoodie, who tackled him. A bystander's video caught the scuffle that followed: Baca drew a handgun from his waistband and fired four shots. "There's a man down," someone shouted. "There's a man down!"

Throughout the hours-long demonstration, Albuquerque police had waited behind the museum with an armored car, some watching from museum security cameras. Meanwhile, members of the so-called Civil Guard, dressed in Army uniforms and helmets, tried to keep protesters from the statue. They were there, they claimed, to keep peace and enforce the law. After Baca shot the protester three times, the militia surrounded him, protecting him as he sat in the street. The nearby police took four minutes to arrive. The protester, Scott Williams, was eventually taken to the hospital in critical condition.

The shooting at *La Jornada*, Spanish for "the expedition," occurred several weeks after the beginning of #BlackLivesMatter protests in

Albuquerque. At those demonstrations, too, a disquieting camaraderie between official police and another militia, the New Mexico Patriots, emerged. "We're all here for the same cause, man," an Albuquerque police officer said to a group of body-armored gym-goers and militiamen before a #BLM protest, according to a video taken by a militia member and shared online. "We're here to help."

The incidents are in line with the deeper history of the Albuquerque police's behavior during the civil rights movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. *High Country News* unearthed archival documents from the Center for Southwest Research illuminating a history of police cooperation and cross-pollination with

radical right-wing and vigilante groups in New Mexico. According to police and FBI reports, newspaper clippings and the testimony of activists, that cooperation included surveillance, harassment and misinformation campaigns against social justice movements by informants and radical provocateurs.

While community members and activists have long complained about excessive use of force and surveillance at protests and in minority neighborhoods, these documents clearly show that New Mexico law enforcement tolerates — and at times embraces — white vigilantism. And despite the Albuquerque Police Department's statement condemning the New Mexico Civil Guard after the shooting, militiamen with known white-power affiliations continue to patrol protests with the silent encouragement of law enforcement.

"THEY ALL TRAVEL IN the same circles," said David Correia, associate professor of American studies at the University of New Mexico. Correia has done extensive research on the cross-pollination that occurred between police, radical right ideology and vigilantism during the civil rights movement. "These are all former police or former military, or former guardsmen or current guardsmen. There's this overlap between the people who populate militias and populate police departments."

Police brutality and political repression



Protesters call for the removal of the statue of Juan de Oñate as an armed militia member looks on outside the Albuquerque Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, June 15. **Adria Malcolm**



Members of the New Mexico Civil Guard militia group are apprehended after a protester was shot in Albuquerque in June. **Adria Malcolm**

flourished in Albuquerque throughout the civil rights movement. A 1974 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights documented an array of alleged abuses and found that police in Albuquerque and across the state used unconstitutional and at times violent, even deadly, methods when policing minority neighborhoods and political dissidents, including the Chicano groups Alianza Federal de Mercedes and the Black Berets.

The militant Black Berets regularly faced death threats from the local Minutemen militia as well as misinformation campaigns organized by the anti-communist John Birch Society. According to Beret leader Richard Moore, the group sent an informant to the militia's meetings in the late-1960s and created a roster of those who attended, including multiple police departments comprising the secretive Metro Squad, a police intelligence unit. "Many members of the right-wing Minute Men (sic) organization were from the sheriff's, the state police, and the Albuquerque Police departments. So making a distinction between the two sometimes wasn't easy," said Moore in 2001. The group gave out the list at a press conference in Santa Fe, including to a New Mexico attorney general, hoping for an investigation. It never came.

In 1968 and 1969, a spate of bombings struck some of Alianza leader Reies López Tijerina's relatives. In May 1968, William "Tiny" Fellion — a paid assassin, demolitions expert and John Birch Society member, as reported by state police just two months earlier — blew off his left hand planting a bomb at Alianza's headquarters in Española, New Mexico. According to a New

Mexico State Police report, Fellion told an officer that "he would kill Tijerina and his followers 'free of charge because he has no use for that type of people.'" After Fellion's botched bombing, tips came in that led both Alianza and the FBI Albuquerque Field Office to believe local police were behind the bombings.

ON THE CLOUDY EVENING of June 1, two weeks before the Baca shooting, members of the New Mexico Patriots met with at least six Albuquerque Police Department officers outside the Jackson Wink Mixed Martial Arts Academy in downtown Albuquerque, before a #BLM protest. "If you guys would see something, gives us a holler," an Albuquerque officer told the militia. "But take care of each other and, the main thing, take care of the people in Albuquerque."

Jon Jones, an MMA fighter, explained that their goal was to stop protester "shenanigans" without brandishing their guns.

"A lot of these (protesters), they just move from one block to the next block to the next block," an Albuquerque police officer responded. "So even just being two blocks away — because police are moving there from one side — that would be helpful, just right there."

Emily Gorcenski, a researcher and founder of First Vigil, a group that tracks far-right violence, says that there is an extensive history of armed vigilante groups collaborating with police. "Militia groups regularly coordinate with police," she noted on Twitter. "From Portland to Charlottesville, we've seen armed paramilitaries working directly with police against protesters

over and over." During the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally in 2017, police circulated a false white supremacist rumor that antifa planned to inject police with fentanyl. That same year, at a Portland alt-right rally, American Freedom Keepers militiamen helped police arrest counter-protesters, allegedly at police request.

In New Mexico, the NM Patriots and the Civil Guard both claim to coordinate with local police, reported the *Albuquerque Journal*, while the Civil Guard also says it has current and former law enforcement and military within its ranks.

THE ALBUQUERQUE POLICE Department did not respond to requests for comment or to questions regarding its officers' possible membership in citizen militias, including the New Mexico Civil Guard, which Police Chief Michael Geier proposed designating as a "hate group" after the Baca shooting. In an email, a spokesperson from the New Mexico State Police said its Investigations Bureau is actively investigating possible state police involvement in militias.

The Albuquerque Police Department has released few details about the shooting. The department's criminal complaint reported that Steven Baca Jr. acted in a "manner in which to protect the statue from the protesters." It failed to mention his violent provocation, and described the crowd ejecting Baca from the scene as "maliciously" in pursuit of him. "Steven was similarly recorded, leaving the area of the statue toward the street interacting with the crowd," the report stated. "However, his specific type of interaction with the crowd is unknown at this time."

Baca was charged with multiple counts of battery, though the shooting charges against him were dropped. He was an Albuquerque City Council candidate in 2019 and is the son of former Bernalillo County sheriff's deputy, according to the *Albuquerque Journal*.

Given the department's history, Correia said, "It's not clear where the line is between police and right-wing fascist militia in New Mexico.

"We know it led to violence directed specifically at individual activists (and) should make us suspicious of the way APD operates today when it confronts social movements like (#BlackLivesMatter)," Correia said. "Because they've done this before, we shouldn't be surprised if they're still doing it."

After the June 1 meeting between Jon Jones, NM Patriots and the police, the bearded militiaman filming the meeting addressed the camera directly. "We're going to be out patrolling in a little bit," he said. "See you guys out there." ☀



Washington Rep. Jim Walsh, R-Aberdeen, speaks at the March For Our Rights 3 in Olympia in June.
Jason Redmond / HCN

REPORTAGE

Extremists as opportunists

Amid a deadly pandemic and massive protests, Patriot militia groups mobilize.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

IN THE FIRST WEEKS of June, as protests against police brutality spread across the country, a group of people who were neither demonstrators nor law enforcement began to appear in the streets. These members of the Patriot militia movement — an assortment of groups defined by antigovernment, pro-gun and conspiracy-driven ideologies — watched from the sidelines, kitted out in bulletproof vests and camouflage and armed with semi-automatic rifles.

By mid-June, there had been 136 instances of paramilitary, far-right and armed militia groups or individuals attending anti-police violence protests nationwide, according to Political Research Associates, a social justice think tank. In Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, militia groups and motorcycle clubs gathered in hopes of confronting antifascists who never materialized. In Oakdale, California, rumors of a Black Lives Matter protest drew members of the California State Militia but few others. In Olympia, Wash-

ington, members of the Washington State Three Percent guarded businesses, at, they said, the owners' request, posing for a photo with a police officer. (The police department later launched an investigation into the incident.)

The protests and concurrent pandemic have proven a boon to extremist groups looking to increase their visibility. During the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak, Patriot militia members — particularly those in the Three Percent — mobilized around food drives and "reopen" rallies. Then, as protests against police violence spread, Three Percenters and other Patriot militia groups positioned themselves as guardians of private property and free speech. The leadership vacuum left by state and federal authorities in recent months offered the groups an opening, allowing them to accrue clout, provide services in lieu of government action and build political influence.

"We've certainly seen a clear pivot from mili-

tia groups active in the so-called reopen protests to, now, armed security in local communities," said Amy Herzfeld-Copple, deputy director of Western States Center, a politically progressive organization that promotes inclusive democracy. "That has a real chilling effect on democratic practice. We see a throughline from militia groups mobilizing to exploit the pandemic to their military presence in small towns across the West — another opening for them to try and posture as providing a service that we'd normally look to government to provide."

The Three Percent has been particularly visible in the Western U.S. Founded in 2008, in opposition to President Barack Obama's administration and its perceived threat to gun rights, the movement takes its name from settler-colonial mythology: the belief that just 3% of people in the 13 British colonies took up arms to fight in the Revolutionary War (a statistic that historians dispute). Members generally describe themselves as defending individual liberty from a tyrannical government. The sprawling and decentralized movement is without a national leadership structure: Some Three Percent groups operate statewide, while others are county-based. And while some have disavowed racism, others are virulently anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant. Because anyone can claim the movement, a variety of activities, from violence to paramilitary training to nonprofit food drives, have been carried out beneath its banner.

Still, several ideological tenets bind Three Percenters together. One is a refusal to obey "unjustified martial law" or a "state of emergency." So when the novel coronavirus arrived in the United States earlier this year, some members were primed to oppose the policies enacted to curb it. As schools and businesses closed and governors issued stay-at-home orders, rumors of "medical martial law" circulated. Three Percenter Facebook pages roiled, comparing stay-at-home orders to the Holocaust, questioning the legitimacy of local and state public health decisions, predicting civil war and spreading misinformation about COVID-19.

Threats, real or perceived, provided an opportunity for a show of strength by various Patriot militia groups. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Washington State Three Percent — which rejects the antigovernment, militia and extremist labels — delivered truckloads of goods to food banks, coordinated a dozen food drives and organized reopen rallies to address the twin problems of food insecurity and economic fallout, according to Matt Marshall, the group's founder. Meanwhile, its Facebook posts included threats to contact tracers. As a registered nonprofit, the group is required to "be

operated exclusively to promote social welfare.” Marshall — a Republican currently running for the Washington House of Representatives — is on a school board; other members are on city councils and run food banks. “The purpose (of the group) is to prepare, and support the community. And, if the time ever came, defend the community,” said Marshall. “Not taking a militia-type role, but a truly grassroots support role.” Marshall is also a supporter of Washington state Rep. Matt Shea, who, last year, was found to have participated in domestic terrorism by an investigation commissioned by the Legislature.

Patriot militia groups, who generally see themselves as good community members, often use civic engagement to gain local support and new members. After Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in 2017, Oath Keepers mobilized to provide boats, search and rescue operations and medical care. In the Pacific Northwest, there are at least 20 instances of Three Percent and other Patriot militia groups signing up for Adopt-a-Highway, a nationwide program that promises “positive impressions when consumers know that you are doing good for the community.” In May, the

Real 3%ers Idaho coordinated the distribution of 15,000 pounds of surplus potatoes donated by a farm in Reardan, Washington, according to *The Coeur d’Alene/Post Falls Press*. Armed members of the group later showed up in Coeur d’Alene during a protest against police violence.

Washington State Three Percenters also intertwined their pandemic efforts with a political push. In May, the group posted on Facebook asking for volunteers to help with the next food drive, while also collecting signatures for a ballot initiative to repeal Washington’s comprehensive sex education law. (In June, the petition, which was backed by anti-LGBTQ+ groups, gathered enough signatures to get the initiative on the November ballot.) Tying ideological aims to the distribution of essential goods is problematic, Herzfeld-Copple said. “Often, part of their ideology is to replace civil infrastructure. And if they have opportunities to step in and build shadow government infrastructure, it’s not going to serve the interests of the whole community.”

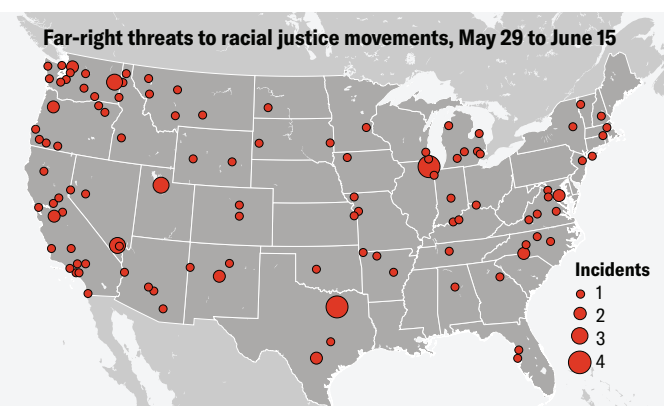
THAT CONCERN IS REFLECTED in Patriot militia groups’ presence at protests as an extra-judicial authority, which they point to as another example of fulfilling a civic duty. At a Black Lives Matter protest in Sandpoint, Idaho, organizers denounced the armed presence of militia members as nothing but intimidation, saying they neither needed nor wanted their protection, according to *The Sandpoint Reader*. The mayor of Sandpoint echoed this in a statement: “Civilians have legal authority to use firearms for self-protection, not vigilante justice. It is the job and responsibility of the police to enforce the laws and protect the city from looting or violence.”

In the past, militia groups have directed their ire and conspiracy theories primarily at the federal government, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the Anti-Defamation

League’s Center on Extremism, who has been studying the groups since the 1990s. Now, for the first time, they have someone in office to stand behind. President Donald Trump has broad support within the militia movement, so groups have turned to state-level issues, focusing especially on laws limiting access to guns. In 2018, Three Percenters and Oath Keepers campaigned for an ordinance that would allow county sheriffs to disregard gun laws they deemed unconstitutional. (It passed in eight Oregon counties.) This year, Three Percenters in Oregon and Washington are running for precinct committee officer, county commissioner and state representative.

Researchers say Patriot militia group leaders are political extremists who clearly operate as such. “They contribute to a conflictual understanding of politics,” said Sam Jackson, who researches antigovernment extremism at the University at Albany and is the author of an upcoming book on the Oath Keepers, “where there are enemies across the political divide, and we’re in a battle against those enemies, and we need to be prepared to use whatever means necessary against those enemies.”

Watchdogs expect Patriot militia groups to mobilize around this year’s election. It has happened before: In 2016, after then-candidate Donald Trump spread false rumors of voter fraud, Oath Keepers showed up at polling stations. In Portland, Oregon, in 2017, the local Republican Party voted to hire Three Percenters and Oath Keepers to provide event security. This year, amid ongoing waves of the pandemic and with some states halting their reopenings, “there is going to be so much distraction and calls for voter suppression by the White House between now and November,” Herzfeld-Copple said. “There are going to be lots of openings for antidemocratic groups to seize.” ☀



Source: Political Research Associates with the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights; research support Alexander Reid Ross

THE LATEST

A reprieve for Dreamers

Backstory

In 2017, when the Trump administration rescinded DACA, the Obama-era program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the University of California filed a lawsuit against the federal government to challenge the termination. DACA, which protects eligible undocumented youth from deportation and provides work permits, has helped some 700,000 recipients remain in the country. Ending the program would endanger the legal status of undocumented UC students and hundreds of thousands of others (“Why the University of California is fighting for DACA,” 1/13/20).

Followup

On June 18, the Supreme Court blocked the effort to end DACA by a 5-4 ruling, with Chief Justice John Roberts concluding that the administration’s decision to rescind it was “arbitrary and capricious.” The University of California hailed the ruling as a victory, but vowed to continue its fight for DACA recipients, immigrant rights and a permanent pathway toward citizenship for undocumented immigrants, reminding the *Los Angeles Times* that the program is still vulnerable to future attacks from this administration.

—Kalen Goodluck



Christina Tingling weeds her garden in Chimicum, Washington. Her family, concerned about food supply during the pandemic, also invested in chickens and four pigs. “Even though we live in an area with robust local farms, we know they, alone, can’t feed the whole Quimper Peninsula, so we are doing our part by planting and raising more than we need to share with our co-workers and neighbors if needed.”

Food insecurities

In Washington, COVID-19 is forcing a reassessment of the food supply.

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY BROOKE WARREN

TO REACH JEFFERSON COUNTY, Washington, on the eastern edge of the Olympic Peninsula, most people take a ferry or the floating Hood Canal Bridge. Blackberries line trails, fruit trees flourish, and locals collect clams and crabs along the beaches. Small-scale organic produce is sold at farmers markets and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs).

The coronavirus pandemic tested this growing agricultural community and exposed its weaknesses and inequities. With an estimated three days’ worth of food on grocery shelves, people were forced to wonder what would happen if they had to rely solely on their local food systems.

Fortunately, some had already been pondering the question. The possibility of an earthquake or disaster disrupting the regular food supply prompted community groups to begin collaborating in 2006. Though processing capability and storage are still barriers, the nine

Food Bank Farm and Gardens have become key to supplying the four local food banks with fresh organic food.

Now, a Food Resilience Task Force has formed to try to connect the food systems with the public utility district, so that the land’s bounty is accessible to all. “It’s as much about building community as it is about growing food,” says Dave Seabrook, who managed the Food Supply Unit of the COVID-19 emergency response team. “You’re not really food-secure unless your community is food-secure.” ☀

David Seabrook works in the greenhouse he shares with neighbors in Chimicum, Washington. As part of Jefferson County’s coronavirus response, he served on the Food Supply Unit, monitoring the local food supply. “One of our objectives was to focus on long-term food resiliency,” he says, “which is basically disaster preparedness” (*opposite right*).



Kathy Ryan, president of the Food Bank Farm and Gardens of Jefferson County, prepares bundles of herbs harvested at the Quimper Grange food bank garden in May. The gardens, run by volunteers, produced more than 4 tons of food for the food banks last year (*above left*).

Rochelle Raines hands Lucian Hegler, 4, a lunch prepared at Salish Coast Elementary School. The state requires schools to continue to provide lunches to eligible kids during the pandemic; about 50% of Jefferson County's students qualify (*above right*).

Michele Minor serves up a homegrown salad with her son, Jakob Minor, and his girlfriend, Marcela Wallace. Michele last grew food 17 years ago with her own mother, but this year, she says, "I saw the possibility of a shortage of fresh stuff, so we decided to grow a garden" (*left*).



The job loss epidemic

COVID-19 impacts ripple through every sector of the economy.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

BY FEBRUARY, THE SPREAD of COVID-19 was already eroding the global economy. First, global travel restrictions depressed the oil market. Then, as the virus reached pandemic proportions, it began hurting even the healthiest industries, throwing the global economy into the deepest rut since the Great Depression.

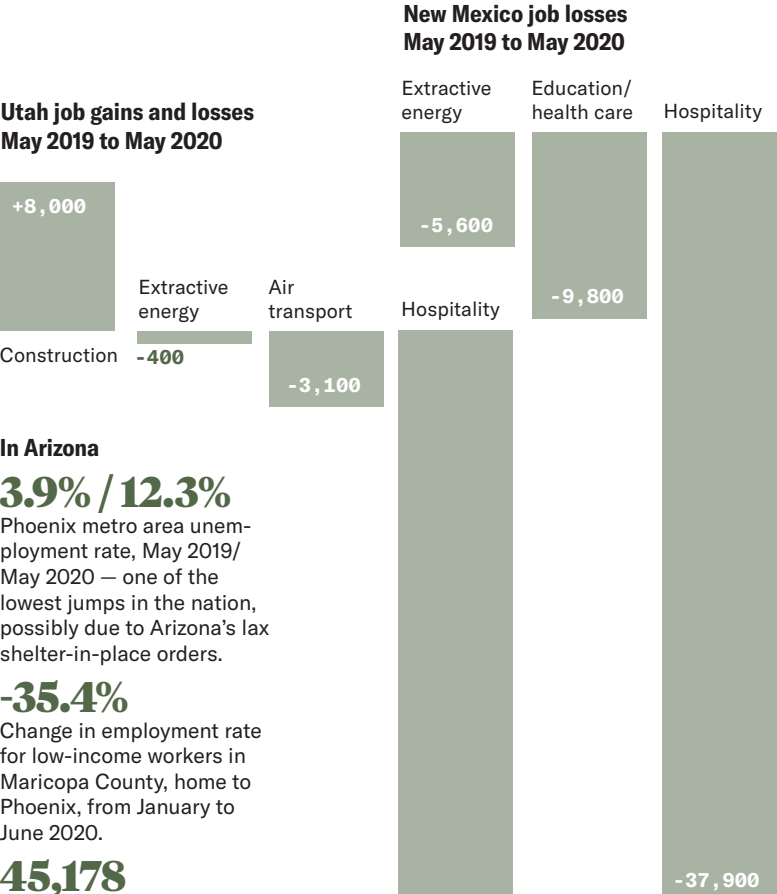
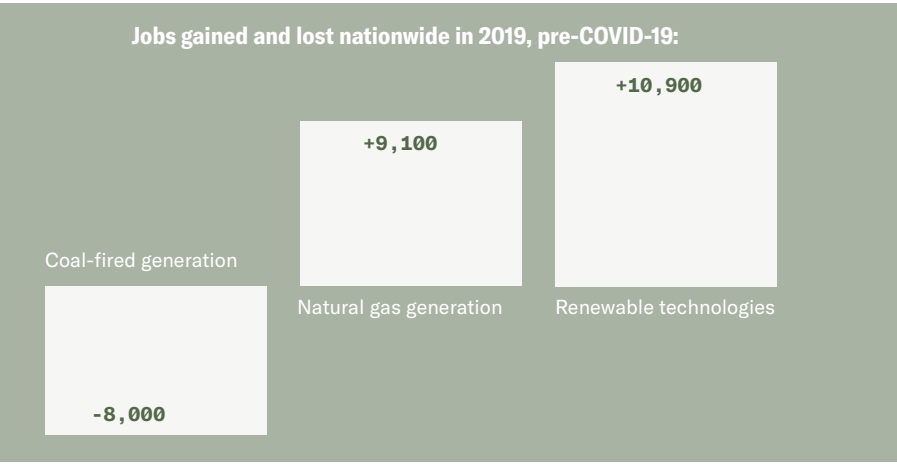
The recession has been hard on clean energy, which was thriving at the end of last year despite unhelpful, even hostile, policies from the Trump administration. Between 2009 and 2019, solar and wind generation on the U.S. electrical grid shot up by 400%, even as overall electricity consumption remained fairly flat. Renewable facility construction outpaced all other electricity sources, but the disease's effects have since rippled through the sector, wiping out much of its previous growth.

Global supply chains for everything from solar panels to electric car components were the earliest victims, as governments shut down factories, first in China, then worldwide, to prevent transmission of the disease. Restrictions on construction further delayed utility-scale solar and wind installations and hampered rooftop solar installations and energy efficiency projects. The setbacks are especially hard on the wind industry, because new wind farms must be up and

running by the end of the year to take advantage of federal tax credits. Meanwhile, the general economic slowdown is diminishing financing for new renewable energy projects.

Clean energy, which has shed more than 600,000 jobs since the pandemic's onset, is only one of the many economic sectors that are hurting. In just three months, COVID-19 wiped out more than twice as many jobs as were lost during the entire Great Recession of 2008. The impacts have reverberated throughout the Western U.S., from coal mines to tourist towns, and from casinos to dairy farms. Some industries, including clean energy, bounced back slightly in June, as stay-at-home orders were dropped and businesses, factories and supply chains opened back up. But a full recovery — if it happens — will largely depend on government stimulus programs and could take years. ☀

Infographic design by Luna Anna Archey; Graphics by Minus Plus; Sources: Solar Energy Industries Association, BW Research Partnership, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Energy Information Administration, Taxpayers for Common Sense, Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker, Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, New Mexico Workforce Connection, Utah Department of Workforce Services.



In Arizona
3.9% / 12.3%
Phoenix metro area unemployment rate, May 2019/ May 2020 — one of the lowest jumps in the nation, possibly due to Arizona's lax shelter-in-place orders.

-35.4%
Change in employment rate for low-income workers in Maricopa County, home to Phoenix, from January to June 2020.

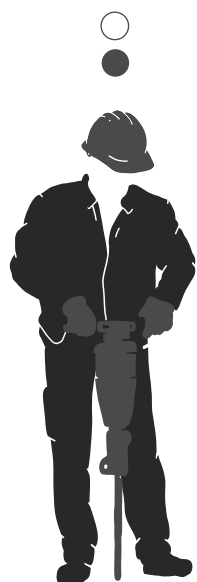
45,178
Number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Maricopa County as of June 24. Arizona has one of the highest per capita rates in the world.

In Colorado
-33.6%
Change in consumer spending in affluent Pitkin County in June as compared to January 2020. Statewide, spending dropped by 11%.

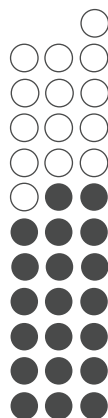
-52.4%
Change in employment rate for low-income workers in Pitkin County during that same period.

Total jobs by industry, January to May 2020

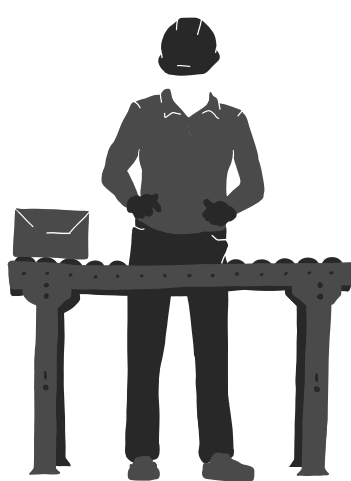
○ 500,000 jobs lost
● 500,000 jobs retained



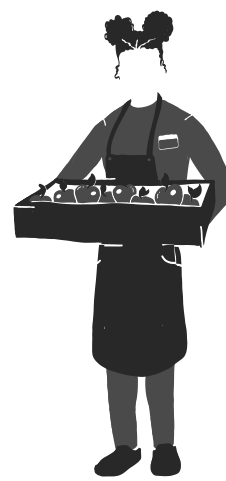
EXTRACTIVE ENERGY



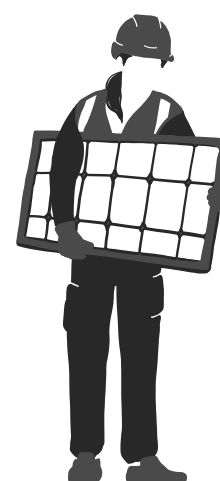
HOSPITALITY



MANUFACTURING



RETAIL



CLEAN ENERGY

\$591 billion

Amount of tax cuts to corporations in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act passed in March. The cuts allow companies to deduct net operating losses in 2018, 2019 and 2020 against income taxes paid over the last five years, allowing some to get checks from the IRS. While this applies to all companies, it seems tailor-made for oil.

\$1.59 billion

Amount of federal tax rebate checks 12 oil companies have received under the CARES Act tax cuts so far. The biggest recipients include Marathon Petroleum and Occidental.

193

Number of oil and gas leases in Wyoming that were granted coronavirus-related royalty relief by the federal government.

4%

Unemployment rate for both the state of Nevada and the city of Las Vegas in May 2019.

33.5%

Las Vegas metro area unemployment rate, May 2020, the biggest change and the highest rate in the nation.

25.3%

Nevada's unemployment rate for May 2020 — the highest in the nation that month, followed closely by Hawaii (22.6%).

128,400

Number of hospitality and leisure industry jobs lost between May 2019 and May 2020 in the Las Vegas metro area.

10,774

Number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Clark County, home to Las Vegas, as of June 24 (483/100,000).

52,800

Number of jobs lost in breweries, wineries and distilleries

7,500

Number of jobs lost in the dairy products industry, February-May 2020.

+5,000

Number of jobs gained in the meat slaughtering and processing industry, which has had some of the worst outbreaks of coronavirus, during the same time period.

287

Number of workers at a Hyrum, Utah, meatpacking plant who tested positive for COVID-19 in early June.

+1,500

Number of jobs gained in the wholesale grains and field beans sector.

61%

Retail job losses by women in April, even though women made up just 48% of the retail trade workforce.

99,717

Number of jobs lost in the renewable electric power generation sector during the first five months of 2020.

\$90 billion

Amount included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009's clean energy package in the form of tax credits, incentives, grants, research and development funds, and subsidized loans.

Unemployment rates by demographic, February 2020 / May 2020

3.1% / 12.4%

Unemployment rate for white Americans

5.8% / 16.8%

For Black Americans

3.6% / 12.2%

For men

3.4% / 14.5%

For all women

6.1% / 24%

For women 20-24 years old

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Dear Friends

It's that time of year: We're thrilled to welcome three new editorial interns — the first to participate in our newly revised, fully remote coronavirus-era internship program. Look for their work in these pages soon.

Jessica Douglas, who hails from Beaverton, Oregon, is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. Her love for journalism sprouted when she joined the *Science & Memory* experience at the University of Oregon. The program — which brought together art, climate change and story-telling — was perfect for Jessica, who is also a botany enthusiast and painter. During her time at the university, she interned with the *Daily Astorian* and *Eugene Weekly*, and received a degree in journalism with minors in art and Native American studies.

Victoria Peterson was born and, mostly, raised in Anchorage, Alaska. At the University of Alaska Anchorage, she created a hyper-local magazine to report on her home neighborhood. *The Spenardian*, now in its fourth year, has won several statewide journalism awards. After graduating, Victoria spent two years at a small daily newspaper on the Kenai Peninsula, where she covered fishing, energy, politics and education. Nowadays, she is back in Anchorage, where she tends her small window herb garden.

Eric Siegel is a lifelong student of literature and observer of landscapes and their politics. In his undergraduate years at the University of Vermont, he majored in geography and English, and also enjoyed a stint as a doctoral student in environmental literature at the University of Iowa. More recently, his inquiries into Western landscapes have led him from freelancing for *HCN* and teaching environmental ethics to petroleum engineers to researching with the U.S. Forest Service in Montana.

Readers, we want to hear from you! What were the defining issues for the West in the '70s? What were you doing? Share your thoughts and photos from the time, and we may publish them here, as we kick off a 50-year *HCN* retrospective.

Finally, one correction. Due to a typo, our July feature, “Fish Out of Water” stated that scientists know enough to bring the Yaqui catfish back from extinction. In fact, they do *not* know enough to do this. We regret the error, though perhaps not as much as the catfish do.

—Nick Bowlin, *for the staff*



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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic requires an ethical response, including limited travel. But that doesn't mean you can't visit your favorite nearby spots (as long as you politely distance yourself from others). This year's photo contest is dedicated to the art of responsible, local appreciation.

Send in your favorite photos of your "socially responsible West" to hcn.org/photocontest

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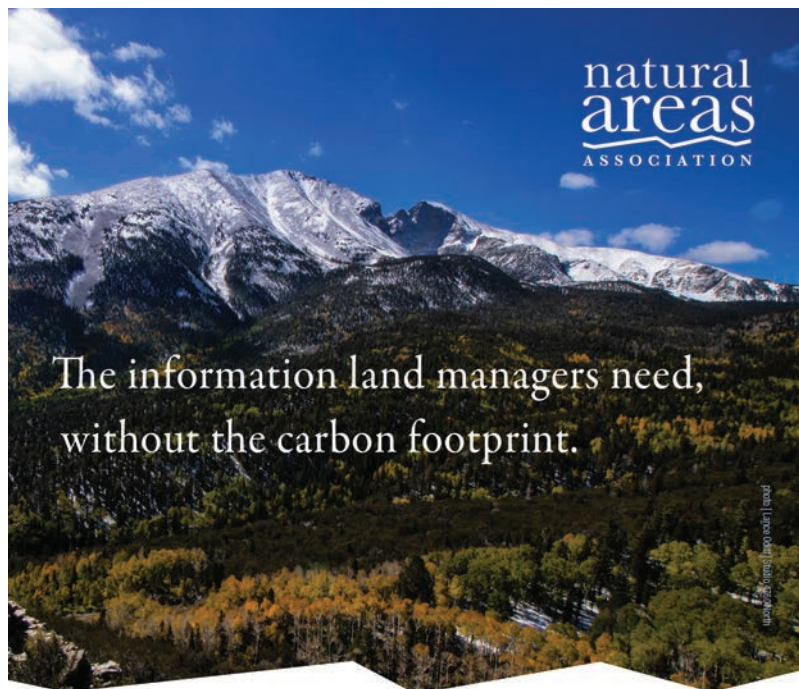
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(continued from page 7)

rich coders can buy their share of the building up front. For tenants, the Ellis Act can mean forced displacement; for landlords, it eases the process of selling a residential building.

Oliver and other housing organizers say that repealing the Ellis Act is not feasible given the powerful real estate lobby, so they

set out to find their own policy tool. First came a program to publicly fund purchases of local buildings, established in 2014. But housing advocates found that many properties changed hands in back-channel deals between landlords and developers. San Francisco addressed this problem in fall 2019 with the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA), which guar-

antees local nonprofits like MEDA a five-day window in which to make an offer on a distressed property before the building owner can sell it. The nonprofit then has 25 days to match other bids.

Landlords and developers oppose COPA, largely due to this bureaucratic delay. Joshua Howard, executive vice president of local government affairs for the California Apartment Association, a trade group that represents 25,000 rental property owners across the state, said that more housing is the key to addressing California's housing crisis. Policies like COPA don't do this, he said, but they do "create bureaucracy and delay." Howard supports funding for nonprofits like MEDA, but said they should bid on properties that hit the market, just like a private entity. "(Right-to-purchase policies) would not create new units of housing," he said, "but do serve to slow down the process for a property owner to sell their rental unit."

For Bay Area residents, the Ellis Act is so notorious that it has become a verb. Chloe Jackman-Buitrago, who was born and raised in San Francisco, said she feared being "Ellis Act-ed" back in late 2019. Jackman-Buitrago owns a photography studio around the corner from her building in the Inner Richmond neighborhood. When her apartment building hit the market, she looked at other rentals in the area and doubted she would be able to stay in the city if she was forced out. MEDA bought the building instead, and she was able to stay.

"(MEDA) is keeping people in their homes," Jackman-Buitrago said. "These are the people who keep this city running, who make this city what it is. The tech 22-year-olds come in and turn the buildings into some fucking cookie-cutter thing, and where do the people go?"

The building-acquisition program requires that all residents of a property favor the purchase. When she talked to her neighbors about supporting a MEDA

purchase, however, Jackman-Buitrago ran into a strange problem: To people used to the city's typical real estate moves, it seemed too good to be true. It took some convincing, but eventually they came around. With the help of the city, MEDA will manage the building for a 99-year term. It has also promised to do work that the previous landlord neglected; in Jackman-Buitrago's apartment, for example, dirt would creep up from under the floorboards, and the wall behind the bathtub had rotted away. Jackman-Buitrago, her husband, Michael — also born in the city — and their 1-year-old son will soon move into a previously empty unit. MEDA is undertaking major repairs, including replacing the rotting boards in the old apartment and updating the kitchen in her new one.

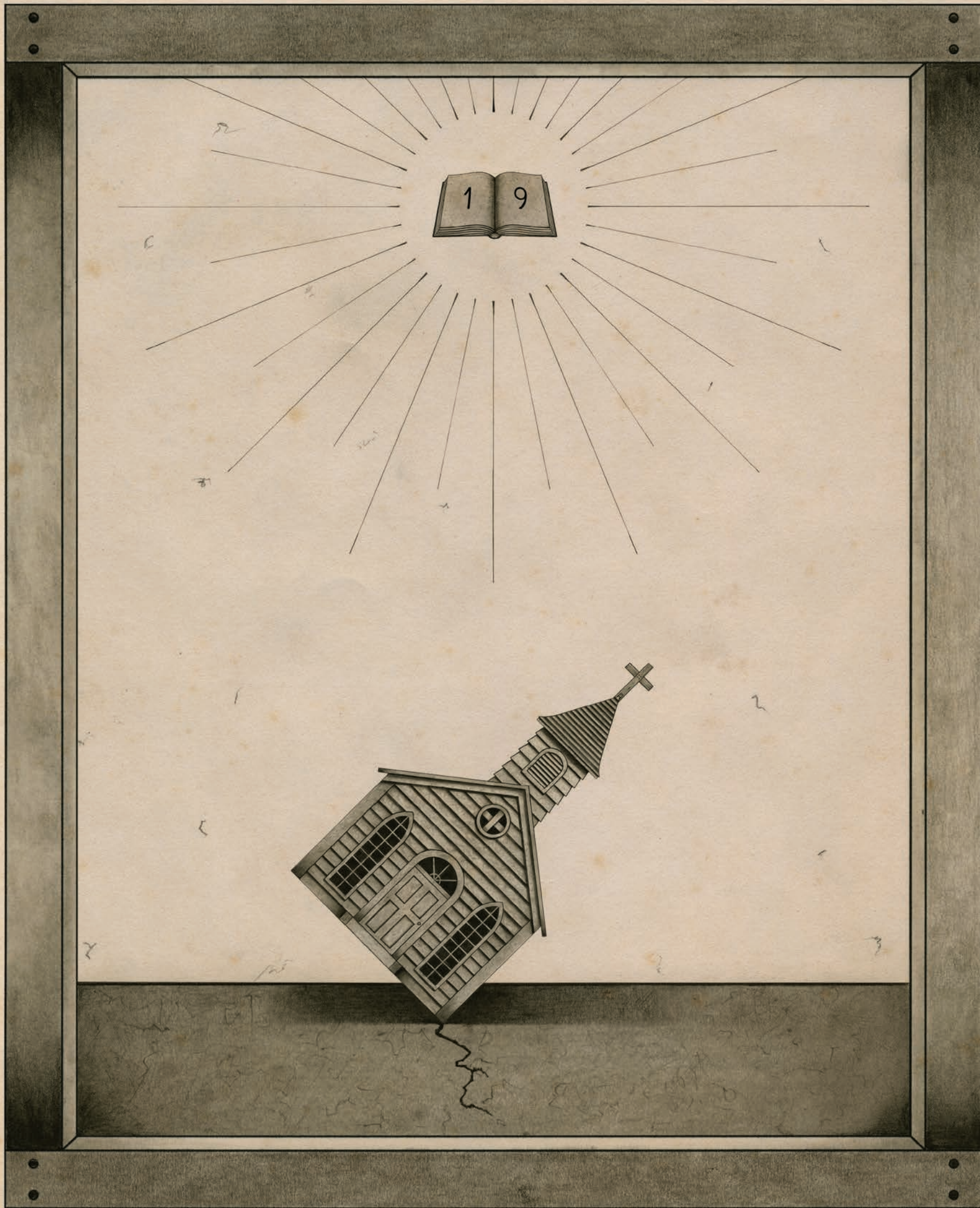
Though it took a pandemic for tenant-protection policies to gain momentum, Oliver, the MEDA organizer, cautions that these policies are small compared to the magnitude of California's housing crisis. Keeping people in their homes is one way to alleviate the pressure, but so is building more affordable housing. Tens of thousands of people have been forced to leave the Bay Area over the last 20 years. Then there's the scale of the building-acquisition program, which currently involves fewer than 10 nonprofits. There are more potential properties moving toward the market than housing nonprofits can afford or manage. And because of COVID-caused budget issues, Oliver expects that San Francisco will have to reduce funding for nonprofit purchases of local real estate.

Jackman-Buitrago often feels a sense of loss; the city of her childhood is largely gone, she said, yet the area still feels like home. Bell has seen 45 years of change in the Bay Area, and she agrees. She has no desire to live anywhere else, but says that development has diminished the city she remembers. "A community doesn't just re-form," she said. "It's gone." ☀

"These are the people who keep this city running, who make this city what it is."



Chloe Jackman-Buitrago stands outside her apartment building with her son on a recent June afternoon. MEDA purchased and started renovating the property last year. **Christie Hemm Klok / HCN**



By Leah Sottile | Illustration by Dan Winters

Biblical Proportions

As a plague sweeps the land, zealots see a gift from heaven.

W

HEN IT BECAME CLEAR that the invisible tentacles of the pandemic would spare no one, not even people in remote North Idaho, the leader of one controversial church knew the word of God could pause for nothing.

So Doug Wilson pivoted. Christ Church — a popular Communion of Reformed Evangelical church in liberal Moscow, Idaho — took things outside,

in compliance with social distancing restrictions put in place by Idaho Gov. Brad Little. Sunday services looked like drive-in movies: Wilson preaching on a raised wooden platform in a yellowing field to a line of sedans and SUVs and minivans, parishioners honking their hallelujahs.

The church also recorded indoor services and uploaded the videos to its YouTube page, which has over 870 subscribers. In a recording from April 1, Wilson — a bearded 67-year-old, professorial in a sweater vest and necktie — told those watching that they should not seek a return to normal, everyday, pre-COVID-19 life when restrictions lifted, presumably in May. “In mid-May we will be just days away from Pride month. Pride month. A time of LGBTQ celebrations. Now, is that what we mean by back to normal? ... Back to Pride month?” he asked. “Wouldn’t it be better to call it ‘dog returning to its vomit’ month? Isn’t that what it is?”

For Wilson, this was typical sermon material. The pulpit is where he talks politics, abortion, the need for wives to be subservient to their husbands, his belief that same-sex marriage is a sin and that Christians have a continual duty to repent. His views have long been the subject of heated debate in Moscow — a college town he intends to be the subject of a “spiritual takeover” — and drawn the attention of civil rights activists. In 2004, the Southern Poverty Law Center profiled Wilson after he co-authored a pamphlet on slavery, characterizing it as a “life of plenty”

for Black people. (His co-author was Steven Wilkins, the former director of the white nationalist League of the South.)

Wilson has never backed away from those writings. Rather, he revels in his controversial profile: In one 2018 video, he casually smoked a cigar while sitting on a burning couch. “It’s not the job of the preacher to be a firefighter out in the world,” he said. “We’re supposed to be arsonists.” Wilson characterized himself to me as “about as conservative as you’re allowed to be,” but his writings in recent months go beyond mainstream conservatism, revealing common extremist talking points. In March, he said President Donald Trump is in a battle with “the deep state.” In April, he called environmentalists a “pagan death cult.”

Wilson wasn’t alone. In the far northwestern corner of Montana, worshippers at Liberty Fellowship in Kalispell were hearing similar conspiracy theories about COVID-19. There, Pastor Chuck Baldwin said the virus was a fear-mongering device dreamed up by the government to declare martial law. “Make no mistake about it,” he wrote in a blog post titled “Now We Know How Germany Let It Happen.” “We are in the beginning of a war against our liberties that will not subside until the American people decide, AGAIN, that essential liberty is more valuable than temporary safety.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented extremist religious figures across the Northwest with an opportunity. The virus, the shutdown orders and the resulting uncertainty stemming from a chaotic and contradictory federal response became a tool, a call to arms and a moment to push scientific skepticism, anti-government conspiracy theories and apocalyptic Christian Reconstructionist ideas to fearful people looking for answers.

But leaders like Wilson and Baldwin were not coming up with these ideas on their own. They were spouting ideas that have long existed at the edges of the far right, rooted in a decades-old movement seeking to eliminate the separation of church and state and simply hand the reins of America over to Christians with fundamentalist belief systems. In order to

understand both pastors' reactions to the virus and the subsequent shutdown orders, one need look no further than the founder of Christian Reconstructionism — which advocates for a society governed by Biblical law — and an early defining split within a religious-right think tank he founded, the Chalcedon Foundation.

In COVID-19, its followers appear to have seen a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

THE CHALCEDON FOUNDATION formed in 1965, the brainchild of Rousas John Rushdoony, a Calvinist philosopher and the founder of Christian Reconstructionism. Sometimes called “dominionism,” it’s the belief “that Christians, and Christians alone, are Biblically mandated to occupy all secular institutions until Christ returns,” writes Sara Diamond in her 1995 book *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. Critics have called dominionism “Christian Sharia.” Rushdoony openly stated that homosexuality, murder, adultery and a myriad of other things should be punished with the death penalty. The Southern Poverty Law Center lists the Chalcedon Foundation as an anti-gay group.

Few scholars are as familiar with the life and work of Rushdoony, who died in 2001, as Michael McVicar, a Florida State University professor of religion. In 2015, McVicar authored *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, a book he compiled after the Chalcedon Foundation gave him unfettered access to Rushdoony’s personal papers.

In his book, McVicar writes about a split within the foundation in the mid-1980s between Rushdoony and Gary North, Rushdoony’s son-in-law and protégé. In the late 1970s, after North took his father-in-law’s teachings in a new, more forceful direction, Rushdoony called him a blasphemer and fired him. North was known for his associations with leaders of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, a conservative Christian lobbying group, and, McVicar writes, pushing “the reach of Rushdoony’s ideas into political and grassroots activism, and the farthest-flung edges of the American Right, ranging from the militia movement to the Ron Paul wing of the Libertar-

ian and Republican party.”

While Rushdoony preferred creating Reconstructionist educational programs and emphasizing the family as the center of life, North took a more aggressive approach, believing Reconstruction ideology “could be accelerated during periods of social unrest and economic collapse.” In 1979, North founded the Institute for Christian Economics in Tyler, Texas, where he turned his attention to survivalism, stockpiling guns and producing a newsletter called the Remnant Review, filled with conspiracies and survivalist fantasies, including that Y2K would be the end of society. These and other actions earned him the nickname “Scary Gary.”

“Rushdoony also encouraged his followers to buy guns and gold ... but for him it was a much more practical, theological exercise: ‘Be a Libertarian Noah,’ ” McVicar explained over the phone this spring. “Gary North is like, ‘Yeah, sure, Libertarian Noah, but shit will hit the fan in your life.’ ”

Chalcedon, now led by Rushdoony’s biological son, Mark Rushdoony, is still active, and North, now in his late 70s, still blogs. So in the early days of the pandemic, McVicar kept his eyes on what Chalcedon and North were saying about stay-at-home orders and calls for a quarantine to see how evangelicals might draw out marching orders. “They seem to be conceding that it’s real, it’s not the ‘plandemic,’ it’s not this ‘Chinese virus’ conspiracy manufactured in a lab,” McVicar said in late April. “They’re taking it very seriously from the standpoint of protecting families and protecting communities.”

A week or two earlier, as reopening protests were popping up around the country — from Idaho to Michigan, New York to California — news had emerged that many of the rallies were planned and paid for by conservative political groups. McVicar told me he could see the influence of both Rushdoony’s strict biblical views and North’s more doomsday ideas everywhere — even on protesters’ signs.

“One of the things I’ve seen pop up in this ‘liberate your state’ movement are signs that say ‘Quarantine the sick, don’t quarantine the healthy,’” McVicar said, an idea that comes

straight from Rushdoony’s teachings. “Rushdoony is explicit in his reading of (the book of) Leviticus that you quarantine the sin. The sin here is the disease. ... You don’t quarantine the healthy because if you quarantine the healthy, it leads to community illness. Because the community can’t function.”

And he noticed more aggressive messaging, too, that reminded him more of North. “It’s an opportunity to make sure your guns are locked and loaded, your stockpile of tobacco and booze and gold dollars are ready,” McVicar said. “Every event is an opportunity to reinstate some kind of Christian order if things collapse.”

AS THE QUARANTINE stretched on, despite low confirmed case numbers in Latah County, Idaho, where Christ Church is located, Wilson began to push back against the governor’s stay-at-home orders. The church opened its K-12 Logos School in early May, and resumed in-person services, replete with hand-sanitizer and space between seats, but no mask requirements.

Wilson began to think state governors should have taken a more biblical approach to quarantine. He believed that by asking everyone to stay at home, officials had overstepped. “The authority that’s granted is the authority of quarantining the sick, but not quarantining the whole population,” he told me in May. “I believe that has been massively counterproductive and has done more damage than if we’d let the coronavirus run. You’re standing on the oxygen hose for countless small businesses, and you’ve got people who need to feed their families.”

When asked how he would respond to observers who say he’s exploiting people’s fear to further his anti-LGBTQ+, anti-women, anti-abortion agenda, Wilson responded frankly.

“Yeah,” he said. “I am.”

But he said he takes issue with the word “exploit.” “If a minister is saying, ‘Jesus and I want you to buy this product of mine that will protect you from the coronavirus,’ that’s exploitation,” he said. “If you say, ‘Look, the country you grew up in is coming apart. It’s coming unstuck. Let me explain to you why that is, and I’m going to tell you for free’ ... that’s not exploitation. That’s simply relevance.”

In Montana, Liberty Fellowship’s Chuck Baldwin — who declined a request for a phone interview and would not answer emailed questions — responded to the pandemic the way North’s teachings might suggest. A glance at his history suggests why.

Baldwin, now 68, has worn suits and ties and his hair combed over to the right for at least three decades. And he’s woven his religion with his politics for at least that long, too. In the

“What they’re attracting in this moment, are individuals who are panicked, who are afraid, and don’t have adequate information.”

early 1980s, he served as the Florida director of Falwell's Moral Majority, and in 2008, he ran for president under the banner of the Constitution Party, which holds that Christianity is the foundation of the U.S.

When Baldwin moved to Kalispell, in Montana's Flathead Valley, in 2010, he did so in the belief that "God has led us to the conviction that Montana (along with other Mountain states) is going to be the tip of the spear in the freedom fight," he wrote in a blog post. Once there, he formed Liberty Fellowship, which meets at the Hilton Garden Inn in Kalispell. From the pulpit, Baldwin decries homosexuality, socialism, communism, welfare, Zionism, the "New World Order," and anything that requires government oversight. He actively pushes churches to revoke their nonprofit status. He'll officiate weddings, but only if the couple doesn't ask him to sign a state marriage license. He talks a lot about the Second Amendment, and suggests people swap out their IRAs for gold.

The particular corner of Montana where Baldwin settled was also home to a wide variety of extremist groups who held similar beliefs about the government, guns and God, like the Militia of Montana and Pioneer Little Europe, a group that hoped to establish a whites-only homeland in the state. Not long after his move, Baldwin also began a long tenure as the chaplain for the Oath Keepers militia, which actively pushes an anti-government agenda.

But by the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 prompted Montana Gov. Steve Bullock to institute statewide stay-at-home orders, Baldwin was irate that the Oath Keepers weren't anti-government enough. When the militia's founder, Stewart Rhodes, penned an open letter to state governors urging them to "be proactive" and institute shutdown orders to prevent the spread of the disease, Baldwin tendered his resignation, accusing Rhodes of "resorting to gross fearmongering and hyperbole" and aiding the government in "attacking virtually every constitutionally protected liberty."

"We know extremists exploit these situations," said Cheryl DeVries of Love Lives Here, a Flathead Valley affiliate of the Montana Human Rights Network, which formed in the 1980s to combat hate groups in the state. "They use wedge issues to divide communities and, sure enough, that's where we are right now."

The most recent divide in Kalispell started when Baldwin invited Annie Bukacek, a Flathead Valley physician, to speak at his church in April. Bukacek, who sits on the boards of both the Flathead County Health Department and the Montana Shooting Sports Association and is the president of the Montana Pro-Life Coalition,

"I believe that they will seize upon any opportunity to push their goals and agenda, and this pandemic is just the latest thing."

stepped to Baldwin's mic to whoops and cheers from the congregation. She wore a white lab coat and a stethoscope, but no mask. "At a time where telling the truth is considered a threat to national security, we're very blessed to have a pastor who tells us the truth," she said.

"Amen!" voices called back.

Bukacek unspooled an argument attacking media reports about COVID-19 as false, and claiming that the legitimacy of death certificates of those who had died from the virus were unreliable, because pre-existing health conditions could have killed them. The video of her speech went viral. With Bukacek at his side, Baldwin reminded people of his core belief: Government entities cannot be trusted.

Days later, a petition emerged to remove Bukacek from her position on the health board; soon, a second petition popped up to keep her.

DeVries said Bukacek, who has run her Hosanna Healthcare practice in the Flathead for years, is someone local people know and trust. "There's a lot of people who really like her and feel like she's smart and courageous, and because she's a doctor, she has additional credibility," DeVries said. She sees Bukacek's appearance at Baldwin's church as a way to recruit new believers during a moment of uncertainty, to push conspiracy theories on them and, as North suggested, more tightly braid a conservative religious ideology with their politics.

"IT'S DISAPPOINTING," said Eric Ward, executive director of Western States Center, a progressive nonprofit working to strengthen inclusive democracy. "Here we are in a moment where America actually needs its leaders to be leaders. People are panicked — rightfully so. People are losing jobs and they're feeling that economic pressure and don't know what to do, and need help. And what we are finding is that leaders, instead of leading, are exploiting the fear."

And that panic, Ward said, causes people to seek answers. Conspiracy theories are everywhere right now, inserting a constant stream of disinformation into social media feeds. President Trump's rhetoric hasn't helped; he's called

the virus a "hoax" and "the Chinese virus," and at one press conference suggested the injection of household cleaning supplies was a treatment worth exploring.

Meanwhile, pastors like Wilson and Baldwin are seizing the moment. Pushing a story that the government manufactured a pandemic in order to seize people's rights "takes what are pretty standard responses to pandemics and infuses them with an idea of a dark conspiracy," Ward said. "It works, because what it seems to do is take someone who might be feeling disempowered, and now places (them) in a central role.

"Now (they) become a warrior," he said. "A fighter of truth."

To Daryl Johnson, a former lead analyst of domestic terrorism at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, this was simply a case of extremists doing what extremists do best. "I believe that they will seize upon any opportunity to push their goals and agenda, and this pandemic is just the latest thing," he said.

During the early days of the pandemic, when millions of people were laid off and many more were staying at home, Johnson said religious extremists found a captive audience — which might explain how Baldwin and Bukacek's video went viral. "When people self-quarantine, they've got free time on their hands," he said. "You've got programming that caters to these things, that feeds into it, leads people down the rabbit hole. (Extremists are) basically using this time period to recruit."

McVicar sees Wilson and others who march on the path paved for them by Rushdoony and North as arsonists ready for society as they know it to burn. So anytime there's a tragedy — like 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina or COVID-19 — they're poised to strike, ready to use fear to further divide people.

"(The) coronavirus is a gold mine," McVicar said. "This is morbid, but every death here, every nursing home with an outbreak, every local state and municipality that struggles to manage their ICU beds, every governor who looks lost — every single aspect of that looks like the opportunity for Christian men and women to reassert order." ❀





Hidden Wounds

The mental health cost of wildland firefighting.

By Mark Betancourt | Photos by Michael Hanson

AN HOUR OR SO BEFORE DAWN in late July 2015, just south of the California-Oregon border, Danny Brown turned off the highway into the Modoc National Forest and headed toward a menacing glow of flames to the west. As he drove through a labyrinth of dirt logging roads, the smoke thickened in the beams of his headlights. At 46, Brown had been a wildland firefighter with the Bureau of Land Management for 14 seasons. He was a leader, reliable and steady. Within hours, all of that would change.

Brown was not scheduled to take charge on the Frog Fire until later that morning, but he headed there early because Dave Ruhl, his friend and fellow firefighter, was missing. Ruhl had been one of the first on the scene, and when a change in the wind caused a sudden blowup, his team lost radio contact with him.

Former Bureau of Land Management firefighter Danny Brown stands in the Modoc National Forest near the place where his good friend Dave Ruhl died fighting a fire in 2015.

Brown and Ruhl had known each other for 12 years, crossing paths on fires across the Western United States. But it wasn't until they were both detailed to the Modoc with the Forest Service that summer that they became close. They worked out of separate guard stations, but on slow days they'd each drive an hour to meet up somewhere in the woods and have lunch.

When Brown reached the fire, he parked his truck near a group of pale green Forest Service fire engines huddled in the darkness. The fire was raging, so Brown and others searched its edges, shouting Ruhl's name over the roar of burning timber. At first light, they fanned out in the devastation left behind by the blowup. Just after 9 a.m., some young firefighters from Arizona called out: They had spotted the charred remains of Ruhl's body.

By the time Brown reached his friend, the others had headed back to their crews. As he stood there alone, waiting for the ambulance and law enforcement, something inside him snapped.

He had seen death before. Wildland firefighters are considered "all risk" emergency responders because of their extensive and versatile training; on previous calls, Brown had responded to a car accident, a plane crash and a suicide. But it wasn't the sight of Ruhl that uncoupled some vital gear in Brown's brain, turning him into a jumpy, irascible man for years afterward. It was the surprisingly sweet smell. Brown hadn't eaten since the night before, and the scent of the seared flesh made his stomach growl.

In an instant, the primal wrongness of that response played havoc with his psyche. "I know we're meat eaters or whatever, but that was not natural," he later recalled. "We're not cannibals."

The nightmares began that night, shrinking Brown's sleep to a few tortured hours. Always the same dream: The two of them sit in a guard station, laughing, but Ruhl is a burned husk. Brown tells his friend that this frightens him. Then he wakes up.

Other, more conspicuous symptoms followed. Whenever Brown's senses told his brain that something was on fire, he gagged uncontrollably. The smell of smoke and the oscillating tone over the Forest Service radio that announces a new fire call had the same effect. He had to leave the house when his wife was cooking meat.

Almost five years after Ruhl's death, I met Brown at a Starbucks in Klamath Falls, Oregon, near his home on the outskirts of Bonanza, a tiny farming town. As he sipped his coffee, recounting that day and everything that followed, I could see the toll it had taken on him.

He started but rarely finished sentences. His icy blue eyes alighted restlessly on random objects in the room. His fingers twitched. Every 15 minutes, it seemed, he cycled from calm to manic. "This all makes me feel weak-minded," he told me. "How do some people that have been through this go on, and stay in fire and not be bothered?"

The trauma Brown sustained that day could happen to any wildland firefighter. It drove him out of the career he loved and the community that came with it, and to his agony it limited his ability to support his wife and their three children. He was eventually diagnosed with chronic PTSD — post-traumatic stress disorder — and in his most desperate moments, he thought about taking his life. Adding to his suffering was the feeling that he had been abandoned by the government that put him in harm's way.

THE FIRST THING BROWN DID after finding Ruhl's body was to retrace his friend's last footsteps. Brown knew there would be an investigation, but he wanted to see for himself how that night had unfolded. He backtracked the meandering boot prints, now dusted with ash; Ruhl would have been angling for the best view as he directed water drops from a circling helicopter. Then the wind changed direction, the fire exploded, and a wall of flames 80 feet tall ripped toward him. Brown found a single boot

print marking the moment Ruhl realized what was happening, the toe dug into the ground as he tried to outrun the flames.

Brown followed Ruhl's path, which he calls "Dave's last walk," twice that day. In the months and years to come, he returned to the burned forest again and again, sometimes four times a week, sometimes in the middle of the night. He can't say why, exactly. Maybe it's a canker sore of guilt he can't stop bothering — if he'd been there, he could have warned Ruhl about the dangerous shift in the weather. Maybe he'd have been with him and died that day, too. Perhaps to atone, and because it's all he can do now, he goes to the forest to keep Ruhl company. "I kind of feel like that's where he is," Brown told me, "and it's lonesome."

For many PTSD patients, revisiting the details of a trauma can be healing. If a professional therapist guides the process, the patient can learn to deconstruct the negative thoughts and feelings that come up whenever the experience is relived, redirecting them into less harmful channels. But Brown — revisiting Ruhl's death on his own — could be merely deepening his wounds. The kind of treatment he needs was not provided by his employer, the federal government. In fact, he's had to fight for what little help he's received.

The BLM employs roughly 3,000 wildland firefighters every year, the Forest Service another 10,000. Thousands more work for other federal and state land-management agencies. The government doesn't track the incidence of post-traumatic stress among them, citing privacy considerations, but anecdotal evidence suggests it's common. In a 2018 study that surveyed 20 wildland firefighters, for example, 11 reported having had "clinically significant" suicidal symptoms.

There are plenty of reasons why. The job involves a level of danger on a par with military combat, but the threats — smoke, falling trees, vehicle accidents, not to mention fire itself — are often even more sustained and relentless. Exhaustion and separation from loved ones compound the mental toll. For months, firefighters endure these conditions, filled with adrenaline and a sense of purpose, surrounded by close friends who are experiencing the same thing. Then, at the end of the season, they have to go home and be spouses, parents, ordinary citizens. Like returning combat veterans, they often struggle to adjust to peacetime life, and many turn to alcohol and drugs.

"We see a lot of bad things in winter," said Nelda St. Clair, a consultant who coordinates fire-specific crisis intervention and mental fitness for federal and state agencies. "People

Many say the government offers them an impossible choice: Take the injury in stride, or go work somewhere else.

Danny Brown clears snow from the plaque that marks the place where his friend Dave Ruhl died in 2015 while fighting a fire in the Modoc National Forest (above left). Brown continues to suffer from the trauma of discovering Ruhl's burned body.



lose their sense of belonging, their identity. They lose their structure. That's when we tend to worry about them."

Longer, more intense fire seasons are pushing firefighters harder each year, St. Clair said, and the threat to their mental health has been growing. Middle managers like Brown, who work through the off-season and shoulder the psychological burden of sending subordinates into harm's way on ever-larger and more dangerous fires, are especially vulnerable.

There are no official numbers, but St. Clair tries to keep track of how many wildland firefighters take their own lives each year. Her unofficial tally suggests as many die by suicide as in the line of duty.

Over the past few years, the wildland firefighting community has become increasingly aware of trauma exposure within its ranks, but the federal and state agencies that employ firefighters remain ill-prepared to handle cases like Brown's. Treatment options are limited and difficult to access. Rather than help traumatized employees recover, many say the government offers them an impossible choice: Take the injury in stride, or go work somewhere else.

In the weeks after Ruhl's death, the Forest Service organized crisis intervention sessions for his coworkers, common procedure after a fire fatality. The sessions, officially called Critical Incident Stress Management, or CISM, involve a visit from a team of peer supporters — fellow firefighters who understand the job's unique culture and challenges and are trained

in discussing trauma — and at least one licensed clinician. Over a few days, the team describes common responses to a traumatic event and teaches general coping methods, referring firefighters for more care if necessary. Done well, the sessions are effective in helping most survivors. But trauma affects different people differently, and symptoms may not appear for weeks, months or years.

"CISM is not therapy; it's psychological first aid," said Jim Duzak, a nurse practitioner in psychiatry who was a smoke jumper for three decades and now works on CISM peer-support teams. "It's like learning how to put a splint on a broken bone, but you're not the surgeon."

It wasn't until halfway through the next fire season, when he was working for the BLM again, that it became clear Brown needed the psychological equivalent of a surgeon. Scott Havel, Brown's longtime friend and direct supervisor at the time, heard from crew members that Brown was acting strangely whenever they were dispatched to a fire. When the next call came in, Havel followed Brown's fire engine to see for himself. Brown pulled over and started dry-heaving by the side of the road. Then he got back in and drove to the fire.

"Of course, that threw some red flags up for me," Havel said. "After the fire, we got back to the station, and I sat down and visited with him, and he goes, 'It happens on every fire.'"

After that, Havel kept Brown off the fireline for the remainder of the season, giving him administrative tasks instead. Havel and Abel

Harrington, another close friend and supervisor of Brown's, say they didn't know what to do next. "We don't train for this. We don't know enough about it," said Harrington. "I'm getting on Google, and I'm trying to figure out what the heck's going on."

Havel and Harrington suggested that Brown see a therapist. He knew they were right — sheer grit could not suppress what was happening to him. But there aren't a lot of therapists who specialize in trauma in rural areas, and the closest psychiatrist Brown could find who would take his insurance was 100 miles away in Ashland, Oregon. He made the drive, and the therapist immediately diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder.

After a few visits, Brown's insurance company told him it would stop covering his therapy. If his PTSD was an on-the-job injury, his employer would have to cover treatment.

So Brown turned to the Employee Assistance Program, or EAP, a benefit for federal workers that offers everything from work-related stress counseling to financial advice. It's not intended for specialized or long-term treatment, however; employees get only six free sessions. After hearing Brown describe his symptoms, his EAP counselor referred him to an outside trauma specialist. But he couldn't afford to pay for one out of pocket.

Brown's only other option was workers' comp, which would turn out to be the hardest part of the struggle. The federal Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) is notori-

ous among federal firefighters; many believe it focuses more on weeding out fraudulent claims than paying legitimate ones. Proving a psychological injury and linking it directly to something that happened at work is especially difficult. Although he had already been diagnosed with PTSD, Brown had to drive five hours to Portland to receive the same diagnosis from an approved doctor, who added the words “severe” and “chronic.” It took months for Brown to get an answer about his claim.

In response, an agency spokesperson said OWCP is “strongly committed to timely and accurate adjudication” of claims, and the majority of them “are accepted and paid quickly.”

As is true with most patients seeking mental health treatment, the process was complicated by Brown’s condition. His attention was scattered; he was easily distracted by the emotions — rage, fear and confusion — he struggled to keep at bay. Havel and Harrington tried to help, especially with navigating the workers’ comp bureaucracy, but they both found Brown an unreliable source of information.

“We almost had to be in the room to get what was happening, and what avenues were being taken,” said Harrington. “The cognizant thought in putting that all together, it just wasn’t clicking.”

The workers’ comp office finally approved Brown’s claim in the fall of 2016. But he was not given a list of the doctors it would cover, he said, even after he called repeatedly asking for one. Eventually, enraged by the ordeal, he gave up.

THAT WINTER, the second after Ruhl’s death, Brown withdrew, holing up alone in his tiny guard station, miles from the nearest town. He’d close his office door, not answer the phone, and spend the entire day watching TV. “I was a wreck,” he said. “My innards were just spinning in circles, and I didn’t know which way to go.”

He started avoiding his co-workers, even his closest friends. If he needed to stop by the district office, he’d sneak in through the back door and be gone before anyone knew he was there. “I watched somebody I’d known for 15 years disappear before my eyes,” Harrington said. “If I never have to go through something

like this again in my career, I am a far better person for it.”

By the spring of 2017, it was clear to both him and his colleagues that Brown could no longer work in fire.

In April, by mutual agreement, the BLM revoked the “red card” certification that allowed Brown to do his job. He had no desire to see the fireline again, and he knew his condition could endanger his colleagues. “Fire is dangerous, man,” he told me. “When you’re standing there staring off into space for 10 minutes and not even realizing you did it, you’re gonna get somebody killed.”

Brown asked the BLM for a job packing firefighting gear or loading air tankers, something that would give him overtime hours — half his income in a busy fire year — without triggering his symptoms. But the options were limited. Brown’s district manager offered him a detail as a “range tech” looking after BLM-owned ranchland in the area. He’d get the same base pay as his fire job, but no overtime. Jessica Gardetto, chief of external affairs for the BLM’s Fire and Aviation Program, clarified that overtime is never guaranteed for firefighters. “That’s part of the job,” she said. “They know that when they sign up for it.” More devastating was the fact that Brown would lose his fire retirement — essentially long-term hazard pay that amounted to hundreds of dollars extra per month for the rest of his life.

The BLM’s response followed government laws and regulations, according to Brown’s district manager at the time, E. Lynn Burkett. She has since moved on to the Forest Service and no longer speaks in an official capacity for the BLM. “The agency did everything we could to support Danny, and to offer him work that would not expose him as much to firefighting so that he could heal,” she said. “Many times people do not understand what the agency can and cannot do, no matter how much you explain it to them.”

From Brown’s perspective, the loss of his fire retirement would be a profound betrayal. “I’m a 20-year employee with these people, and they act like I was a two-day employee,” he said. “I don’t want it to seem like it’s all about money, but I’ve got to take care of my family.”

Desperate to keep his benefits, Brown

emailed top BLM officials in Washington. “I feel I am standing alone,” he wrote then-Acting Director Michael Nedd. He received sympathetic responses, but no change to his situation. “I was at the point where I thought, ‘If I just kill myself, at least my wife and kids will have my life insurance and all my benefits.’”

MONTHS EARLIER, frustrated by the bureaucracy, Havel and Harrington had contacted the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, hoping it could help Brown. The Boise, Idaho-based nonprofit was formed in 1999 to support the families of firefighters killed or injured in the line of duty. Over the last few years, that mission has grown to include supporting firefighters themselves. The WFF has helped hundreds get specialized mental health treatment when they needed something beyond the counseling services offered through the Employee Assistance Program, or when workers’ comp failed them. “We fill a gap that the government can’t,” said Vicki Minor, the organization’s founder, who is now retired.

Fire culture itself — known for its “rub some dirt so it doesn’t hurt” mindset — is often a barrier, Minor said. Despite some recent improvement, there is still a chronic stigma attached to mental health and a lack of education about it. Firefighters also worry about losing their jobs if they admit they’re struggling and ask for help.

“It’s not safe for them to tell people they’re having mental trouble,” said Minor. She and others in the firefighter support field believe that, with appropriate treatment, psychological trauma doesn’t have to end careers the way it ended Brown’s. But the government leaves little room for alternatives.

The closest trauma specialist the WFF found for Brown was three hours away. As a stopgap, it connected him with St. Clair, the peer support coordinator. Between July and December of 2017, St. Clair spent hours talking Brown through panic attacks over the phone.

“Danny was in such trauma then,” she said, “he sometimes couldn’t even put a sentence together.” Once, listening to the sound of his gagging, she almost called 911. “There were nights when I was terrified.”

The WFF also helped Brown get a lawyer, who sent letters to BLM officials. Soon after, strings that were invisible to Brown had been pulled, and he had his retirement back.

Asked why the BLM reversed its decision, spokespersons said federal privacy laws prevent the agency from discussing anything related to a specific employee. Derrick Henry, a spokesperson at the agency’s Washington, D.C., headquar-

*“My innards were just spinning in circles,
and I didn’t know which way to go.”*

Danny Brown and his son, Lear, work on a friend’s ranch outside Bonanza, Oregon (above right). Brown is no longer certified to fight fires.



ters, added that “the BLM consistently follows applicable policies for on-duty incidents and personnel matters.”

The effects of Brown’s PTSD have continued to ripple through every aspect of his life. His wife filed for divorce last August. “I think eventually she just got tired of not having a husband,” he said. After Brown lost his overtime pay, she had to get a job, but their combined income still wasn’t enough to cover the family’s bills. Brown now works three jobs, cutting hay and helping local ranchers vaccinate cattle in addition to his range tech duties for the BLM. He briefly pumped gas this past winter but found it didn’t pay enough to justify the time. In a few years, Brown will have put in enough time to take his fire retirement. But he doesn’t think he’ll be able to afford to stop working for the BLM.

THE FEDERAL AGENCIES that fight wildland fire are starting to realize they have a trauma problem, albeit too late to help people like Brown.

For a long time, psychological trauma wasn’t openly acknowledged as a potential side effect of firefighting. Duzak, the CISM clinician, survived a burnover in 1979, when he was a young firefighter. A crew boss was killed, and he helped load the charred body into a helicopter. “We got pulled off the fireline for about 10 hours, then got sent home,” he remembers. “No one talked to us about what happened.”

The government has recently taken steps to change that approach. Education about the psychological risks of fire work and how to

recognize the warning signs of trauma is now part of standard firefighter training. In 2019, a wildland firefighter Mental Health Subcommittee was established by a coalition of federal and state land-management agencies, working with the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the U.S. Fire Administration, to explore ways to improve support. The BLM, with other agencies, has adopted stricter standards for Critical Incident Stress Management, making it less likely that cases like Brown’s will fall through the cracks in the future. By all accounts, the government is getting better at encouraging firefighters and their managers to communicate about mental health, both before and after it becomes an issue.

But encouraging employees to talk about mental health is not the same as providing the resources for healing. Front-line supporters like St. Clair say that without more robust long-term treatment and work flexibility, the government is leaving many traumatized firefighters to struggle on their own.

St. Clair has begun to facilitate telemedicine — connecting firefighters with trauma specialists by phone or video — a boon for those who live in remote areas. “The issue is, how do people pay for it?” she said. Workers’ compensation covers telemedicine, but St. Clair said few firefighters have that option if they haven’t gone through the arduous process to prove a mental health injury.

Brown eventually got a list of doctors that his workers’ comp claim would pay for. There were two in Klamath Falls, the only city within reasonable driving distance of his home. He

tried both, but never went back. The therapists didn’t seem to be listening to him, he said. “All they want to do is give you pills. Nobody can tell you why.”

In late 2017, after more than a year and a half of failed attempts to get treatment, Brown’s family doctor referred him to a therapist who administered Eye Movement Desensitization Processing, a common PTSD treatment that seeks to rewire damaged pathways in the brain by having the patient recall the trauma while making repetitive eye or hand movements. The treatment helped. Brown liked the therapist, and he felt the crushing weight of his condition lift while he was in her office. But workers’ comp wouldn’t cover her fees, and then she moved away.

Brown has since given up on seeking treatment. The travel and the search for someone who can help seem like more trouble than they’re worth. “I’d rather be a nervous wreck the rest of my life,” he said. “I have come to the firm realization that this is how life’s going to be.”

ONE FOGGY MORNING in early December, Brown took me to the place where Ruhl died. On the drive, as we went over the past five years, he seemed to stifle a cough, small at first, then catching in his throat more and more frequently as he talked. By the time we hit the maze of dirt roads in the Modoc, he was visibly agitated. He got turned around; much of the timber killed by the fire had been salvaged, disfiguring the tableau of his memory. But eventually, Brown’s recollection prevailed; the pullout where he had parked his truck was unmistakable.

The place was a black remnant of a forest, stark against an inch of snow on the ground. Beyond a hundred yards, the burned ponderosas disappeared into the fog, which was nearly as thick as the smoke had been five years ago. Brown retraced his friend’s last steps for the umpteenth time, taking me through like a tour guide.

The spot where the body was found is marked by a plaque. Brown started to tell me it was made by Ruhl’s hometown, Rapid City, South Dakota, using stone from Mount Rushmore. In midsentence, his body seemed to constrict, cutting off his last word. “About to have me an attack,” he said. But he kept talking, pushing through the convulsions.

Later, as we drove away, Brown’s mind circled back to the fact that he’d had trouble finding the place. It was gnawing at him. “I start to wonder if I should put little markers on the trees for me for in 20 years, when I come down here,” he said. “Hell, another fire could come through here, and none of this will be the same.” ☼



By Elena Saavedra Buckley | Illustrations by Michelle Lowden

THE RETURN

After a ceremonial shield stolen from the Pueblo of Acoma showed up in a Paris auction house, it took years to unravel the mystery of its loss and to bring it back home.



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FOR MOST OF A CENTURY, before the shield went missing, it lived in the Pueblo of Acoma in west-central New Mexico. Acoma is one of the state's 19 pueblo tribes, with fewer than 5,000 members, half of whom live across four communities on the reservation. The oldest portion sits atop a mesa, which is believed to be one of the oldest continually inhabited sites on the continent — since at least 1100 A.D. by Western measures. It is known outside the tribe as Sky City, and it's an important part of Acoma's economy, drawing visitors year-round for its commanding appearance. It's composed of adobe structures that crowd a risen plane, as if a pillar of earth had shot 367 feet into the air and brought the community with it. The shield lived in a family's three-story home with six other shields, all tended to by a traditional cultural leader. Their caretaker kept them in a cool, dark room on the second floor, on a wooden shelf built into an adobe wall.

The shield and its siblings were passed down from father to son. The caretaker prayed with them daily when they were not being used as a symbol of protection in ceremonies or festivals, when other tribal members could be in their presence. But the shields never belonged to him alone. According to Acoma law, they were collectively owned; they could not leave the pueblo, nor could they be sold or destroyed. They were considered living beings rather than works of art. Cultural patrimony, unlike possessions, is an aspect of a tribe's identity as a people — like Acoma land, language and resources, the shield was one piece of the tribe's cultural fabric, passed down through generations and contributing to the whole.

One day in the early 1970s, the shield and five others vanished from the caretaker's home. The details are clouded: One day they were there, the next they were gone. The family reported the loss to the tribal sheriff, but, as was typical at the time, he did not keep a written record

of the event. No outside investigation took place; for Acoma, and for many tribes, matters of cultural patrimony are meant to be held within the community rather than be exposed to a world that has so often threatened their existence.

When the shields were stolen, the pueblo had already been working for decades to reclaim what had been taken from it. Starting in the 1940s, Acoma litigated and petitioned the United States Indian Claims Commission for millions of acres of territory, reserved for the tribe in colonial land grants but disregarded by the United States. In 1970, Acoma received a financial settlement for its losses, but no actual land. The tribe purchased private property bordering the reservation over the following decades, using its settlement funds to piece together a semblance of what had been.

In 2016, nearly 50 years after the shield was stolen, agents from the FBI and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) brought a photo of it



to Acoma. The image revealed the shield under fluorescent studio lights, floating in front of a gray digital background: Round and rawhide, it showed a face in its center, with black, low-scooped horns, like a water buffalo's, and a red-lipped, jagged smile. The rich colors of the paint — emerald green, with red, blue and yellow radiating from the face's edges — seemed to have survived the years unfaded, even as they flaked and mottled the surface. Two feathers with rusted tips, like an eagle's, hung at each side, pierced through the leather and strung by their quills. The photograph had been taken in Paris, France, by an auction house called EVE, where the shield was consigned for sale. The auction catalog gave no information on how it had arrived or the identity of the seller. "Very rare war shield," EVE's description read. "Probably Acoma or Jemez, 19th century or older." The auction house placed its worth at around 7,000 euros, or \$7,800.

The oldest part of the Acoma Pueblo, known as Sky City, sits atop a mesa and is thought to be one of the oldest inhabited communities in North America. **Christian Heeb**

The agents showed the image to the granddaughter of the caretaker, a woman who grew up in the same house as the shields and was one of the last living people familiar with this one's disappearance. They asked her if the shield in the photograph resembled any of the ones stolen from her grandfather's home. Yes, she told them, except for the feathers; she was certain they hadn't been there originally. The shield had a name, she knew, but she couldn't remember what it was. Still, she would recognize it anywhere.

THAT MAY, EVE held a sale of "Amerindian art, pre-Columbian art, Africa and Oceania" — a type of auction the house holds at least once a year. The shield, one of hundreds of items, hung on a crowded panel in a dark showing room. Navajo blankets were suspended from the ceiling, and a smooth, four-legged slit drum from the Democratic Republic of Congo stood on a wide platform near the

back. Cases held masks, baskets and shrunken heads; mannequin torsos wore tasseled and beaded jackets; a complete, limp deerskin, a ceremonial object from the Hoopa Valley Tribe in California, was draped over a display table, its eyes and mouth sewn closed with red woodpecker feathers. The shield was listed as Lot 68.

EVE, which opened in 2002, sells items, often antiques, from a range of continents and time periods, but it has gained a reputation for repeatedly selling sensitive objects from Indigenous tribes in the U.S. When American laws began to curtail the sale of cultural patrimony within the country, sellers turned to European auction houses like EVE. Alain Leroy, EVE's owner, has justified these sales in the past. "The French market views Native art in a different way than the American," Leroy told *Indian Country Today*, in 2013. "In Paris, any collector experiencing an aesthetic emotion, and a direct contact with an item, will buy it. It



doesn't matter whether it's Maori or Hopi." (EVE did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

When the Acoma shield came up for auction in 2016, it was the second time EVE had tried to sell it. The shield had appeared the previous year in the auction house's catalog at double the price. That time, an Acoma member saw its listing online and notified tribal leaders just days before the bidding began. Acoma knew it had few options, none particularly promising. They could appeal to the auction house directly, but businesses like EVE rarely listen. If they could find out who sent the shield overseas, they could contact them directly, but sellers often exist behind veils of anonymity, making them nearly impossible to track down. Tribes can consider bidding on an item themselves if they have the funds. But all these options operate within the logic of the option house, begin-

ning and ending with the cultural object for sale. The market remains intact.

Acoma wanted to take legal action, but the French court system denied the first attempt, and EVE went ahead with the sale. But owing to either overzealous pricing or Acoma's prayers, the shield didn't get a bid. It remained in the purgatory of EVE's collection for the next year.

By the time the shield resurfaced in 2016, Acoma's religious leaders had appointed a new governor. The position is the tribe's external bureaucratic version of its internal cultural leaders, created by the Spanish crown in 1620 for all pueblo tribes. The term lasts one year, but governors may be reappointed. The man — and it is always a man — spends much of his time flying to and from Washington, D.C. He argues water adjudication cases, develops education and infrastruc-

ture projects, and advocates for the preservation of sacred lands, such as Chaco Canyon, that are endangered by nearby oil and gas drilling.

The role begins with a ceremony held on Dec. 29, with the passing of the Canes of Authority. The canes, straight and wooden, capped in silver, were gifted to the tribe by the colonial powers that gradually redefined Acoma life: first the Spanish government, then the Mexican, and finally, in 1863, President Lincoln. In the ceremony, the outgoing governor returns them to the religious leaders, who then present them to the successor, officially beginning his term. The canes are complicated objects, reminders of colonialism yet symbols of sovereignty.

In 2016, a man named Kurt Riley received the canes and the job. Riley is gentle and relaxed, and he wears his hair in a long braid down the middle of his back. His

face easily cracks into a warm grin when he's off-camera, which is a relatively rare occurrence during a term full of speeches and congressional testimonies. Riley spent most of his career as a pharmacist in Albuquerque, where he grew up. At the beginning, the role of governor, with its constant publicity and travel, felt overwhelming. His predecessor walked him through his responsibilities, but he emphasized the importance of continuing the fight to retrieve the shield. "This is very, very important," Riley recalled being told. "Don't let it be forgotten."

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PATRIMONY and human remains have been commodified ever since they became evidence of conquest. Especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these items were taken from tribes like violent receipts, after fatal encounters with

the American military, through destructive grave-robbing and looting, and during paternalistic visits from researchers. “Many of the early anthropologists imagined themselves to be heroes engaged in dangerous search and rescue missions,” the anthropologist Margaret Bruchac has written, “recovering cultures from extinction, seeking treasures to fill the halls of the great museums.” In reality, these missions drained Indigenous communities of their cultural resources, while U.S. policies did the same. If items did not end up in museums, they landed in federal institutions and university department basements. Others seeped into the private market and traveled through networks of collectors, severed from the communities they helped define.

Federal laws have attempted to protect these items, although gradually and with inconsistent results. The Antiquities Act, passed in 1906, aimed to quell looting on public and tribal lands, but it was too vague to be enforced. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (ARPA), passed during the Carter administration, increased penalties. It made it possible to put those who loot from public and tribal lands in jail, but only if the crimes occurred after the law’s passage.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which passed in 1990, marked a shift in how Congress handled repatriation. If a museum or institution receives federal funding, it must return any identifiable items in its collection that could be considered “cultural heritage” — sacred, patrimonial and funerary objects, as well as Indigenous human remains. The law also makes trafficking items taken after 1990 a criminal offense, and it offers tribes a platform from which to reclaim a vast array of items scattered across the U.S.

But no U.S. law prevents these items from being exported. The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a United Nations

resolution passed in 2007, affirms Indigenous communities’ right to protect and use their ceremonial objects, and requires that countries must resolve situations when objects are “taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.” But it has never been successfully used to repatriate any items to a U.S. tribe. According to the Government Accountability Office, around 1,400 sacred, patrimonial or funerary objects from tribal nations in the U.S., the majority from the American Southwest, were knowingly put up for sale in Paris auctions alone between 2012 and 2017. Half of them were bid on and sold for a total of \$7 million.

The sales couldn’t have reached these heights without the internet. Just a few years after a company named AuctionWeb sold a single broken laser pointer for \$14 in 1995, the site evolved into eBay and amassed a valuation of billions. Anonymous, powerful online bidding began to redefine older auction houses, including the way Indigenous cultural property changed hands.

In 2006, an attorney named Shannon Keller O’Loughlin (Choc-taw) worked as counsel to multiple tribal governments. Some of her clients began to notice their cultural property collecting bids on eBay. What were they supposed to do, they asked her, when the seller could hide behind an account name? “Trying to deal with the quagmire of eBay is really difficult,” O’Loughlin told me. “It’s hard to get to an actual person.” O’Loughlin would contact the site, and sometimes an item was taken down, but the seller “will usually put it back up, and then you get it taken down again.” And so on.

When the fine art auction industry caught on to eBay’s techniques, more sensitive items — such as sacred beaded wampum belts from Eastern Woodlands tribes, once nearly sold by Sotheby’s in 2009 for \$30,000 — began surfacing. “That’s where we really started seeing cultural items (for

sale) that we had never seen before,” O’Loughlin said.

In 2017, O’Loughlin became the executive director of the Association on American Indian Affairs. There, she and her colleagues act as a scouting team, closely monitoring auction houses worldwide and posting alerts when sales might include sensitive items. Few tribes, she told me, have the resources to consistently reclaim items; the hope might be to halt a single sale, perhaps without media attention. “Their only goal is bringing items back and returning them to the journey they were on,” O’Loughlin said.

Tribes like Acoma that are able to prioritize cultural resource protection sometimes assign their own employees to scour the web. “It has allowed us to take a peek and see what people have, and to do something about it,” Aaron Sims, an Acoma member and a general counsel attorney for the tribe, told me. Acoma developed a methodology, taking suspect listings from the internet and consulting with religious leadership to determine if the items could belong to the tribe. But as the web brings transparency to these exchanges, auction houses are adapting. Sims has noticed some houses holding sales with vaguer names than they used to — calling items “ethnographic” rather

than American Indian — in what he suspects is an attempt to throw off people like him. Even more illicit deals recede further into privacy, especially those involving ancestral remains. “From what we’ve been told from law enforcement, in terms of those significant items, they go black,” O’Loughlin said. “They’re being sold hand-to-hand, or they may be sold on the deep web.”

If not the deep web, Paris. Even when scanning auction sites, tribal officials have few options once an item surfaces outside the U.S. “We only see a sliver of cases,” said David Downes, a Department of the Interior official who works on international repatriation issues with other agencies. “Most of the time, museums are respectful of the values that lead the tribe to make the claim or the request. I don’t think that’s as obvious in what we’ve seen in the auction houses.”

“The issue of cultural repatriation is a big one in France, but it is not one that is associated with Indigenous communities (in the United States),” Philip Breeden, a former official at the U.S. Embassy in Paris, told me. France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, has made public commitments to repatriate items looted from African tribes by the French. But there isn’t a clear structure for the country’s courts to

Around 1,400 sacred, patrimonial or funerary objects from tribal nations in the U.S., the majority from the American Southwest, were knowingly put up for sale in Paris auctions alone between 2012 and 2017.

Kurt Riley, governor of the Acoma Pueblo until the end of 2018, was central to the tribe’s effort to return the Acoma shield (above left). **Kalen Goodluck / HCN**

recognize North American Indigenous nations' sovereignty. The U.S. has done little to fight for tribes' international recognition; when a U.N. group signed an agreement on preventing trafficking of cultural property, broadly construed, the U.S. never adopted the export provisions. When it came to trafficked items, "the U.S. was traditionally a destination country, not a source country," Breeden, an American, said. Americans, the thinking went, were more often the ones buying looted cultural items from other countries — not losing them. "We were the bad guys," Breeden said. "So, now, the shoe is on the other foot."

FOLLOWING THE announcement of EVE's second sale, Riley and Acoma's lawyers had just weeks to attempt rescuing the shield. Since their appeals to EVE had been ignored, they knew that their best option was to demand responses from federal officials whose voices might be heard in France. Riley sent letters to then-Secretary of State John Kerry, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, Attorney General Loretta Lynch and dozens of state gover-

nors and Congress members. He described how France had rejected Acoma's attempts to rescue the shield the year before. "Now, we are faced with the same crisis," he wrote. "Our work, and the laws of the United States are continually being undermined by the action of private auctioneers overseas who portray their establishments as safe havens from the laws of the United States." He asked the officials for help. Many did respond with their support, but there was little to do — EVE had broken no French laws. From EVE itself, Acoma heard nothing other than an invitation to place its own bid.

Riley flew to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., just days before the auction, for a press conference with leaders from the Hoopa Valley Tribe and the Navajo Nation, who also had items in the sale. The Interior Department and the State Department had helped organize the event, which would be streamed online. Riley was still getting used to public speaking as governor, and he was nervous the entire plane ride. At the museum, a small crowd of journalists sat in front of

a podium in the museum's round lobby. Riley rose to speak, wearing a turquoise and coral necklace and gripping a copy of his speech as he walked to the microphone. One of Acoma's traditional leaders stood a few steps behind the podium as Riley talked, his hands grasped in front of him, a thumb moving back and forth nervously. Riley called on EVE and the French government to stop the shield's sale, and he spoke about the domestic issues that started long before France; Acoma was aware of 24 items of its cultural patrimony in the U.S. market in the past year alone. There had to be federal support and legal action to stop the patterns, he said. Riley ended by speaking in Keres, the Acoma language. His voice began to break. He went offscript, paused, and began to cry. "For a person in my position, to express my emotion this way," he said, looking out, "maybe in some eyes, it's not a role model for males. But this is how much it hurts my people."

A week later, on May 30, patrons in Paris filed into the auction house, rode up a wide escalator, and sat in the bidding room. A small throng of protesters stood on the sidewalk outside, holding banners that said, in French, "cultural genocide" and "sacred not for sale." Riley was awake on the reservation, where he watched a livestream of the event. Employees in white gloves handled each object as it went up for bids, and the patrons, mostly men and nearly all white, made their offers. Wooden figurines went for thousands of euros, a mummified foot for nearly 800. A Hopi mask crowned with crow feathers sold for over 43,000 euros. Lot 67 came up: a leather shield of richly tanned bison hide, crimson fabric draped around its circumference, with no tribe named. When the Acoma shield should have appeared, though, nothing came across the screen. The auctioneer said that it had been withdrawn. He moved on to a pre-pueblo Anasazi stone sculpture.

"We were so happy," Riley recalled. "But, we said, 'Now

what?' " A cynicism, developed from seeing countless other items disappear in the past, set in: Perhaps the shield had been bought privately, before the auction began, or the seller had changed their mind and kept it. It could already be packed in the back of a car, or stuffed in a box to ship to a collector in another country.

In fact, EVE had quietly removed the shield from sale. The public outcry seemed to have reached the auction house, but only slightly; it sold off other tribes' sacred items, including the Hoopa Valley deer. While the shield hadn't exchanged hands, more than 5,000 miles of land and sea still separated it from its home. It would be years before it moved again.

ON AN AFTERNOON in 1995, an Acoma member named Brian Vallo sat in the Albuquerque airport, waiting for a plane. Acoma's first repatriation under NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which had been passed five years prior, was arriving in New Mexico. He was there to pick up the items, which were the human remains of Acoma ancestors. The moment brought up the difficult, uncertain process of deciding how to welcome them home and where to bury them. Much of the time, these decisions are painful, even if the return is a good thing. Where should tribes rebury their dead, if the lands on which the deceased lived no longer belong to their descendants? What ceremonies should a tribe use to welcome back a sacred object if there is no tradition for such a circumstance? Chip Colwell, a writer and museum repatriation expert, has written that "repatriation is not an end point so much as a process. ... Each case is a new struggle to meaningfully come to terms with history."

"I remember the feeling of those first Acoma ancestors coming back," Vallo told me. "It was a very overwhelming, but also bittersweet moment, of realizing that it takes an effort of many to achieve these

"I remember the feeling of those first Acoma ancestors coming back. It was a very overwhelming, but also bittersweet moment, of realizing that it takes an effort of many to achieve these types of victories — if you want to call them that."

Brian Vallo, an expert in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, worked behind the scenes to bring back the Acoma shield before he succeeded Kurt Riley as tribal governor.

Kalen Goodluck / HCN



types of victories — if you want to call them that.”

Vallo is tall, with Clark Kent hair and a low, full voice that he uses carefully. He’s stylish — rarely without a pair of sleek glasses — and, at 54, looks decades younger than he is. (“Sneaky old,” as one of the Acoma attorneys put it.) As a speaker, he is modest, but he can hold a listener’s attention for hours. At the time of EVE’s auction, Vallo was the director of the Indian Arts Research Center in Santa Fe, but he was often behind the scenes of Acoma projects. He grew up in the pueblo, and most of his family had served in government positions, as had he; his father was governor before Riley, during the shield’s first attempted auction. Vallo’s savvy in and out of the art world has made him skilled in repatriation matters. He is used to mediating between people who see Indigenous patrimony as art, and those who know it as their culture.

After temporarily dropping out of college when called upon to serve as tribal secretary — the youngest

person to do so for Acoma — Vallo became an early NAGPRA expert in New Mexico, assisting pueblo tribes around the state with the law’s complex processes. NAGPRA was, in some ways, radical in its ability to actively push federal institutions to repatriate. Decades of work from Indigenous activism leading to its passage, in 1990, brought public attention to repatriation, especially the staggering collections of human skeletons housed at universities and museums.

“Many institutions, including the federal government’s own Smithsonian, did not have good records,” Vallo said of NAGPRA’s early years. “We were seeing quickly that institutions didn’t know what they had.” When the law passed, it was estimated that there were 100,000 to 200,000 Indigenous human remains in museums and federal agencies, along with 10 million to 15 million cultural items. In 2018, the National Park Service reported that it had returned fewer than half of the human remains in its custody and

around 2 million of the objects.

“I always hoped that NAGPRA would set the course for the ways in which federal agencies — and I would even go as far as to say Congress and the office of the president — interact with tribal groups,” Vallo told me. But even with its successes, the legislation’s flaws are similar to issues with which tribal leaders are familiar. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, until recently, had slashed budgets for cultural protection work. And, even if proper collaboration is possible, tribal officials face difficult decisions: Are they willing to put their community’s private culture on public display in order to get the items back?

IN THE FLURRY after the auction, federal agencies tried to help Acoma by learning more about the item in question. The State Department wanted Acoma leaders to describe the shield and its uses. This was a distressing request: One of the main reasons Acoma wanted to get the shield back was to regain

its intended privacy within the pueblo, to stop having to describe it to outsiders. During early interviews as governor, Riley sometimes refrained from even calling it a shield, opting for “item” instead. “We said, ‘No, we can’t do that,’ ” Riley told me. “They were just at a loss, like, ‘How do you expect us to help you?’ ” Riley tried to explain that, to Acoma, the shield was a spiritual being, and there were boundaries, set by religious leaders, about what could be shared outside the tribe.

Riley and the Acoma leadership recognized that they couldn’t move forward without surrendering some control to the federal legal system; they knew, too, that the shield had the potential to amplify the repatriation struggles of many other tribes in the media. After consulting with cultural leaders, they decided to use EVE’s photo of the shield — the one with the gray background — in press materials, and to allow FBI and BIA agents to interview the granddaughter of the shield’s caretaker. They used

her memories to write an affidavit, which was attached to legal documents sent to France.

"We knew that it was going to take this level of effort, of information, and really, from the pueblo's perspective, this level of sacrifice — exposing itself in a way that it otherwise really wouldn't," Sims, one of Acoma's general counsel attorneys, told me.

The etymologies of "repatriation" and "return" suggest a kind of backward motion, an attendance to the past. The idea of the shield being an "artifact" or "very old," as it and other objects are so often described in the market, implies the same more crudely. But Riley and Vallo have always been clear that, to their tribe, the shield is a matter of the present; bringing it home is not simply about closing the gaps of history, but equipping the tribe with what it needs to sustain itself. It was not a separate fight from securing water rights, language preservation, land. The shield that might return would not be the same one that left; it had experienced many difficult years away from its home, and it would play a different role in ceremonies considering that path. But the tribe had changed, too. It had lived through those same years.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT knew of no clear path to retrieve the shield. "This was the first time that the U.S. was going to ask something from a foreign country," Riley told me, "and they didn't know how to do

that." After meetings with Acoma leaders, the U.S. attorney's office in New Mexico placed a warrant for the shield's "arrest." This allowed France to essentially freeze it in place; the shield couldn't be moved, which was certainly a step, but it was still stuck at EVE.

The tribe asked the auction house for the identity of the seller, but it refused to disclose the name. So Acoma focused on legislative actions. In the summer of 2016, Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., introduced the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony, or STOP, Act. It is a bill Acoma enthusiastically supports. It has not yet been passed, but if it is, STOP will help prevent items like the shield from ever crossing the border. Along with increasing domestic NAGPRA penalties, it would prohibit the export of cultural property and create a certification process, which would involve tribal review. It would also create a voluntary return program, so that people can give up items that might violate existing laws without fear of being penalized.

"If the shield never comes back, it has still done its job," Riley told me. "It brought to light these actions, this awareness, this legislation. It's a shield. It's a protector."

Riley and Vallo began attending different events in Santa Fe to discuss the bill with the Authentic Tribal Art Dealers Association, or ATADA, an organization with whom Acoma has an "arm's-length relationship," as Sims put it. The

group connects collectors and dealers, many of whom buy and sell at large trade shows in the Southwest, like the Santa Fe Indian Market. It also works to bring ethical practices to an often-criticized industry; the group bans the sale of sacred and patrimonial items among its members and offers authentication certificates, and it has its own program to facilitate voluntary returns of sensitive items that do make their way into the market.

But the group, which is largely white, has also criticized the STOP Act since it was first introduced. ATADA's leaders say that they support the bill's concept, but not the bill; they believe that it is vague, and that it would subject all tribal art to a lengthy, prohibitive review process, which would all but kill the market on which they depend. "Can you imagine what the effect will be the first time a tourist has an item seized, not because there is anything wrong with it, but only because it has not been subjected to this tribal review?" Kim Martindale, the ATADA president, said in a 2019 statement. "Once the word gets around at home, that'll be the last Italian or German tourist that will come to Santa Fe, and that will really hurt the tribal artisans that rely on the tourist market for most of their annual income."

Riley, Vallo and Acoma's lawyers all told me that the vast majority of what flows through tribal art dealer markets is fine to sell — and that work by living artists who are tribal members should be encouraged in the industry. Riley is friendly with a few shop owners in Albuquerque's Old Town, a walkable, touristy section of the city where tribal art is often sold. He likes to wander through their shops, and if he happens to see anything questionable, he'll let them know. But to catch sacred or patrimonial items more systematically, tribal consultation has to be better integrated into the industry. In Sims' view, this wouldn't be a radical adjustment. "If you have a question, if you're not sure if it's an item of cultural patrimony, just *call the*

pueblo," he said. But it would shift the structures of control. "That's not how the market has run for the last 50 years."

"What makes the ATADA and other older dealers so possessive and rigid is the fact that the market is going away," O'Loughlin, from the Association on American Indian Affairs, said. She sees many collectors as possessing a colonial, frontiersman-like connection to their collections, which strengthens as the industry withers.

In 2018, Vallo was appointed governor, receiving the canes from Riley. Vallo resigned from his job in Santa Fe to take on the demanding role. But while he was still there, he organized an event over two days with Riley, other pueblo leaders and ATADA to discuss the STOP Act in Santa Fe. Vallo warned his boss that the event might be risky — the School for Advanced Research, the larger organization where Vallo worked, had a donor base that included collectors. If donors heard that Vallo was supporting STOP, they could retaliate by pulling their funding. There were already galleries in Santa Fe in which Vallo wasn't welcome.

The events were held in a hotel in downtown Santa Fe. For \$35, the public could listen to panels about tribal experiences with repatriation and the Indian art market, most of them moderated by Vallo. They took place in the hotel's ballroom, a carpeted and chandeliered hangar filled to capacity with attendees, the vast majority from the dealer community. "We were overwhelmed by the attendance," Vallo said.

In the opening panel, auction house owners from Ohio and New Mexico discussed the optimism they have about their industry; it's becoming more inclusive, they noted, and the number of controversial sales is shrinking. But, in the next panel, leaders from the Navajo Nation, the Hopi Tribe and the Zuni Pueblo complicated the picture. There's still little communication between dealers and tribal leaders, one said. Another talked about how

"This was the first time that the U.S. was going to ask something from a foreign country, and they didn't know how to do that."

View from the Acoma Pueblo (above right).
Christian Heeb

tribal members, in need of money, occasionally felt pressured to sell to collectors.

When the panel on the STOP Act began, the conflicts became more explicit. Most of the tribal leaders voiced their approval of the legislation, but ATADA's leaders objected, calling it unconstitutional. While collectors should do the right thing, one ATADA board member said, "we can't undo the past. We should not be held to the bad decisions of our ancestors."

IN THE AUDIENCE at the hotel sat a man named Jerold Collings. He is 77 years old and a rancher from Mule Creek, New Mexico, more than a five-hour drive southwest of Santa Fe. Collings, who is white, grew up on the banks of the Colorado River, where his parents had a fishing resort. He collected arrowheads from the time he was in grade school, scouring thousands of acres on neighbors' ranches. Back then, as he remembered it, the typical tribal art collector would drive a pickup truck fitted with a camper. "He just went from trading post to trading post, buying something at one and selling it at the next," Collings told me over the phone. His family spent summers in a town with a small pawnshop, where he started purchasing baskets. He admired how much time went into making them. He made connections in Southwest tribal art dealer networks, and the collecting continued.

Collings remembered how easy it used to be to buy large collections, when traders would call him up to come look at what they had. "You might see a table of stuff, and it would all be for sale," he said. He would save his money to buy whole collections for hundreds of dollars, which he saw as a steal. "Now, it's much more sophisticated," he said, "and collectors are looking for the impossible dream."

When his mother died, in 1984, Collings put cardboard boxes from her home into storage. They remained untouched for nearly 30 years, until 2012, when he opened



them. Some boxes held family mementos; others were full of items his family had bought over the years in pawnshops. In a box, by itself, lay the Acoma shield.

Collings didn't think the shield was worth keeping; he told me he had seen many others like it sold in the past, and that it didn't strike him as special. "I didn't have any use for it, and the market in the U.S. was horrible," he said. EVE told him they wanted feathers on it, so before he shipped it to France, he had turkey feathers dyed to look like eagles' and wove them into the shield himself. "It went through one auction and it didn't get a bid," he said, "and in the second auction, all the furor arises."

Following EVE's sale, the auction house sent Collings a box with other items he had consigned that hadn't sold. The shield, still under the warrant's protection, remained at EVE. The box stalled in customs, and in December 2018, the U.S. attorney's office summoned him regarding the shield; Collings believes the shipment is how the government got his name.

Collings wrote a formal response through a lawyer: "The evidence of any theft of the Shield from the Acoma Pueblo is based entirely on hearsay and speculation," his complaint read. "As stated in the Museum catalogue, the Shield has been listed as either

Acoma or Jemez Pueblo. ... It is also possible that the Shield is not of Indian origin at all." He requested that the shield be returned directly to him.

Collings told me that, early on, he had attempted to coordinate a transfer of the shield to Acoma through an intermediary, before the government got involved. (The tribe's lawyers said they received vague messages from middlemen, but none of the offers seemed reliable.) He had no problem with Acoma's claim to the shield, but he didn't want to get involved in a legal case with the government, whose approach he saw as "an overreaction on steroids," he said. Collings remembers going to Santa Fe for the panels on the STOP Act. He remembers Riley explaining the impossibility of items like the shield receiving price tags. To Acoma, Riley had said, they were like family members. How could you put a price on family? "Those are two different views of the world," Collings said. "And us folks are trying to survive in the middle."

In the spring of 2019, U.S. officials shared Collings' identity with Acoma. Vallo, now governor, invited Collings to Albuquerque to meet with him and the tribe's lawyers, including Sims. Collings brought his wife, his attorney and a former ATADA president; Collings is not a member, but he's well acquainted

with the organization. They all sat in a conference room in the law office where Sims worked. For most of the meeting, only the lawyers spoke. Then, at the end, Vallo turned to Collings and explained what the shield meant to the tribe. "To me, it meant nothing more than a reasonably attractive art object," Collings said. "But, to him, I could tell that it was important."

For Vallo, the meeting was challenging. He wanted to represent his tribe tactfully, and he appreciated Collings' willingness to talk. But, he thought, why couldn't Collings have stepped up sooner? How could any repatriation, with all its time, effort and emotion, ultimately boil down to the actions of one person? "It was hard to walk into that meeting and not voice a level of frustration," Vallo told me. "It was probably one of the hardest things that I had to do this year."

Soon after, in mid-July, Collings and his wife requested a second meeting with Vallo, this time with no attorneys. They sat for nearly two hours in a small, three-sided room in the law office, decorated with bookcases and a small statue of Po'pay, the Ohkay Owingeh tribal member who led the 1680 Pueblo Revolt against the Spanish. They shared a plate of pastries and talked about their horses.

Then, Collings told Vallo he

wanted to help. The parties signed a document. Collings, as the shield's consignor, would direct EVE to release the shield into U.S. custody as quickly as possible. An FBI agent would travel there to pick it up and bring it home.

Sims called Riley, only recently retired, to let him know the news. He asked him not to announce it to anyone, but to be prepared to gather when the shield landed in New Mexico. Riley hung up and told his wife he was going for a walk. Outside, he shouted with joy.

THAT FALL, AN FBI AGENT flew to Paris. He picked up the shield from EVE and brought it to the U.S. Embassy, where he swaddled it in thin sheets of flexible foam to keep it snug and dry. At various stops between Paris and New Mexico, he talked his way out of opening the package for customs officials. On each leg of the flight, he bought a second seat for the shield, keeping it at his side.

On the evening of Friday, Nov. 15, 2019, Vallo sat in a seating area opposite of the security entrance in the Albuquerque airport, waiting for the shield, the same place where he had waited for the first NAGPRA repatriation of ancestral remains in 1995. He was accompanied by one of Acoma's lawyers and the tribal interpreter; they reminisced about

previous repatriations, and he held an earth-toned Pendleton blanket he had brought to clothe the shield. When the agent landed, Vallo met him and other federal officials in a private customs room. He watched the man unwrap the foam. "All I could do was cover it with the blanket," Vallo told me, "just to say, 'You are home, and it's time to go.' " He wanted to get the shield in front of tribal members as soon as possible. He carried it to one of the federal agent's cars and sat with it in the backseat, singing for it as they drove north through downtown Albuquerque and to the BIA's offices. Riley, Acoma's lawyers, Vallo's father and mother, and members of Acoma's tribal council and religious leadership stood in a second-floor conference room to receive it. Vallo texted Sims at each step — we have it, we're in the car, we're in the parking lot, we're in the elevator. He finally entered the room with the shield wrapped in his arms.

Sims said that watching the shield be revealed to the room was one of the most surreal moments in his career. It gave off a palpable kind of power. The tribe's religious leaders addressed it and made offerings, acknowledging the long journey it had just finished. It struck Riley that it was the first time he had knowingly been near the shield, despite years of work on

its behalf. "I had seen it in pictures, but to actually *see* it," Riley told me. "I was speechless." Vallo, as he placed it on the table, felt the weight of the moment, especially with his father, who had been the first governor to fight for its repatriation, being there. "I thought I was going to faint, to be honest," he said. Its colors seemed even brighter against the blanket. "It just seemed so vibrant, and happy, to just be present."

Acoma leaders spent hours with the shield, praying until nearly midnight. Some gave speeches, in Keres and in English, and expressed gratitude to the agents who had helped return it. Riley placed a handful of cornmeal near it in thanks. The shield was placed in a secure location in the BIA building, and then everyone left. Riley walked out in the dark, to his black truck in the parking lot, and sat in the driver's seat for a while before driving home. It was hard to believe that, this time, the meetings, testimonies and speeches had succeeded. Later that week, the shield returned to the Acoma Pueblo, and the tribe held a ceremony to welcome it. Snow fell on the mesa as it arrived.

A SINGLE TWO-LANE ROAD winds down from Old Acoma's mesa. It cuts between towers of sandy rock before coming to an Indian service route. At that intersection is the Sky City Cultural Center, which also houses the Haak'u Museum — the tribe's own record of its art and history, there to educate visitors while they wait to board the shuttles that will guide them through the pueblo. In 2000, the last Acoma cultural center burned down in a fire. Vallo, before he became governor, helped direct an architecture firm on the design of the current one. It is a grand building with a kind of pueblo minimalism, a sleek, modern interpretation of the square adobe structures and wooden beams on the mesa.

Around the time the shield returned, the Haak'u Museum had two exhibits. One focused on

the tribe's pottery, the art form for which the pueblo is best known. Glass cases jutted out from the walls, holding the artists' pots — many round and convex near their openings, like acorn squash, and covered with the thin, delicate lines that Acoma potters have perfected.

The other side of the museum held a display called "Growing Up Pueblo." It was mostly paragraphs of text, printed onto plaques spaced out around the room: interviews with elders in the community, remembering what it was like to grow up in Acoma in the mid-20th century. "We played in the ditch at my grandparents' house and got in trouble for being muddy and wet," a quote attributed to a woman named Jolene Mariano read. "My mom would tell us how her mom used to make dough. I inherited all the bread pans after she died." Many others discussed preserving the Keres language: "Jennifer feels that as a community, there needs to be encouragement and sharing of tradition to help preserve it for the future." A man named Elardo Garcia mourned the memories he had lost: "I've had a lot of health problems over the past three to four years. That's why I don't remember any of my childhood," his plaque read. "It is frustrating not to know, especially when my grandkids ask me how I grew up, and all I can tell them is, 'I don't know.' "

In other places at the Pueblo of Acoma, ceremonial items like the shield are placed to rest after completing their journey back home. These are the items that could have been purchased for the sake of someone's private museum: to hang in their homes, or perhaps to sit in storage, collecting strange value from an outsider's gaze. Instead, they wait while cultural leaders decide how and when they will rejoin the life and memory of the tribe. What the tribe had on display for the public was, instead, their living members: the pottery that they make, and the memories they tell, or try to tell, their grandchildren. ☀

*Vallo carried the shield
to one of the federal agent's
cars and sat with it in the
backseat, singing for it as they
drove north through downtown
Albuquerque.*

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A moose wades in Denali National Park & Preserve, Alaska. Kent Miller/NPS

High
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News



ESSAY

Am I an invasive species?

How COVID-19 and 'murder hornets' compelled a writer to rethink invasions.

BY JENNY LIOU

I GREW UP IN A HYBRID HOUSEHOLD, where my father cultivated chives and bok choy and edible chrysanthemum, planting seeds and starts in a plot of earth he'd overturned in the middle of our North Idaho pasture. After my grandfather died, my father's gardening intensified. At the time, I understood this as an effort to turn the abstraction of his Chinese heritage into something tangible and rooted in the earth, growing Chinese vegetables from North American dirt.

But then I went to college, and as I learned more about ecology, I started seeing threats everywhere. Within the dominant paradigm of natural resource management, invasive species are a problem. Some exotic species can outcompete natives, interbreed with them, contaminate the stock. Hybridiza-

tion is one of the leading causes of biodiversity loss. In one iconic story of the West, bull trout have lost themselves to brook trout in this way.

I came home worried that my father's field of chrysanthemum would invade the last traces of native prairie on our ridge, and I demanded that he replace his Chinese vegetables with native plants. I don't remember if he did. I do know that, as a budding ecologist, it never occurred to me that my environmental enlightenment was displacing my father's heritage, which was also my own.

My grandpa used to tell me stories in rambling Chinese, which my father would translate on the spot. When my grandpa died 20 years ago, my father started translating the work of the eighth century poet Li Bai. This spring,

his efforts have intensified, as if he's conjuring bridges between worlds — between China and Idaho, between a father and his child, between the living and the dead. He sends me poem after poem about cranes hungering for home. Legend has it that Li Bai's poems were so realistic that his cranes flew right off the pages. Chinese folklore is full of stories like that, stories about imagination becoming flesh. In another famous tale, the painter Zhang Sengyou created four dragons in breathtaking detail, but did not mark the pupils in their eyes, guarding against the verisimilitude he feared would allow them to leap out of paint and into reality. When someone else decided that the dragons were not biologically accurate and drew in their pupils, the dragons raged into life and the story ended in a maelstrom.

Growing up, I didn't recognize the story of racialized violence written in the landscapes surrounding me: The tree near my home town officially designated Idaho State Historical Site #307, "The Chinese Hanging Tree," as if it were perfectly normal that in 1885, five Chinese men were dangled from its branches. Now I see how the casual language normalizes it, as if lynching were every bit as routine as the cascade of numbers — three-oh-seven, three-oh-eight. At the time, I turned instead toward learning the names of plants, the intermeshing workings of ecological processes, the mechanics of how rivers shape the land. In my naiveté, I believed that the way we talked about nature was some kind of sanctuary, held separate from race.

But this spring's events have changed my mind. The words we use when we talk about nature have a life beyond the pages of scientific journals. *Vespa mandarinia* is a species of very large hornet, also known as the "Asian giant hornet." Apparently, they're invading the Western U.S., via Canada or maybe China, or perhaps Japan or elsewhere in Asia. I heard about the hornets in late winter, not long after COVID-19 was first documented in the Seattle region, where I live. As I read more and more news stories about the coronavirus, and about Asian giant hornets invading the U.S., I couldn't help but contemplate their convergent rhetorics.

Maybe the case of *V. mandarinia* in America can serve as a clarifying parable, laying bare the racial sentiments that have driven both national and personal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. When popular media reports discuss *V. mandarina* and the possibility of containment, it's in the unspoken but inevitable context of an Asiatic contagion that we failed to contain. The wasps present an alternate reality, an opportunity to track, corral and exterminate an Asian threat. Until this spring, I would have supported a concerted public effort to eradicate a threatening invasive species. But I'm no longer

able to separate this environmental management strategy from the harm that the Trump administration's insistent characterization of COVID-19 as an Asian disease has caused to Asian Americans, targeted anew for their race. I have yet to reconcile my training as an ecologist with my growing sense that what I learned reifies violent white norms far beyond the realm of natural resources.

I've come to realize that, like Zhang Sengyou's painting, the words we use to frame our natural resource management practices risk conjuring monsters to life. So I've started trying to avoid the word "invasion," a word I've used casually for years as part of the ecological vernacular, without regard for its ominous echoes in a larger discourse. Now I don't know what to call these wasps from somewhere else. Immigrant wasps. Refugee wasps. Diaspora.

Earlier this year, I watched anti-Asian sentiments morph from social media rants into rabid flesh, as Asian Americans were beaten on streets as empty as 19th century backroads. No wonder so many are still numb to landmarks like the Chinese Hanging Tree. As the spring passed, we stopped calling the hornets "Asian" at all, labelling them instead "murder hornets," as if the racial rhetoric didn't still swarm around them like ghosts.

Maybe this helped set the stage for the press coverage surrounding other forms of racial violence in America that followed: the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd. Maybe a painting coming to life can be a good thing, releasing dragons of rights and resistance. It has become clear to me that the language we use when we talk about wasps or trout or chrysanthemums is value-laden, and those values plant the seeds for how we think about human life.

When this lockdown began, I started a garden out of self-preservation more than anything else: I wanted to ensure that my family would have access to clean, safe produce. Then, as the pandemic

Maybe a painting coming to life can be a good thing, releasing dragons of rights and resistance.

progressed, I started learning more about how the disease was ravaging meatpacking plant workers, throwing into high relief problems I guess I had always known about, but never tried to address. I became newly aware that every piece of produce came to me via someone who picked it and someone who packed it, bodies in unsafe proximity to other vulnerable bodies. I crunched some numbers to decide how likely it was that someone had died for something I'd eaten, and my garden morphed into a self-conscious attempt to minimize my participation in an inhumane agricultural system that disproportionately hurts people of color.

It also prompted me to interrogate the insidious whiteness of how I've learned to think about nature. My hands in the soil reminded me of my father's hands, and the crops I'd demanded he destroy. And so I found a website that sells Chinese plants and chose seeds from pictures that look like things my father used to grow. After all, I am, or am becoming, the unabashed daughter of an immigrant. When I look into my son's strange hazel eyes, which are a star of my own brown embedded in his father's turquoise sea, I realize I won't be telling anyone the story of how brook trout have ruined the West ever again.

"I'm sorry about the chrysanthemums," I recently blurted to my father, though he probably had no idea what I was talking about. It's not just that there's no point calling the coronavirus an Asian threat, or that I'm horrified by how the Asian hornet craze allowed us to enact a metaphorical hunt and slaughter. It's more that this scenario has served as a test case for the divide between how humans steward our landscapes, and how we steward our culturally embedded souls. I think I've ceased to see any difference between the two. "How do I grow these things?" I asked my dad, thinking he'd prescribe a planter or a greenhouse, something to shelter or contain. "Scatter them," he said. ☀

Reimagining nature poetry

Benjamin Garcia's *Thrown in the Throat* uses plants and landscapes to think past oppressive structures.

BY TANEUM BAMBRICK

THERE ARE MANY SITES of entrapment in Benjamin Garcia's debut poetry collection, *Thrown in the Throat*, winner of the 2019 National Poetry Series. Whether a closet or the bellies of carnivorous flora, they work either as places of refuge or the ground from which Garcia questions social structures — racism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, sex-negativity and classism. Personified plants draw attention to and playfully protest norms; the corpse flower, for example, is labeled a “goddess” and a “corpse in drag.” This disruption is reflected in Garcia's choice of form, which uses frequent double dashes (//), to create a kind of forced closure and lend a frenetic, leaping and ultimately devastating pace to the work. The poems are funny, sexy, critical and consistent in their attempts to study how narratives can limit identity expression. “We must be confident being more direct,” Garcia writes, addressing anyone who has yet to realize or feel the results of inaccurate language.

Set primarily in New Mexico and the “gut of Texas,” *Thrown in the Throat* brings urgency to nature and rural life by highlighting systemic forms of violence. Garcia describes Highway 287 as “skewering” the state of Texas, where the speaker's father refuses to stop for anything but gas, fearing both micro and macro acts of aggression. As a result, one brother earns the nickname “Castrado,” after cutting himself while attempting to urinate in a can. A restaurant owner refuses the family service, an act that magnifies the ways in which the systemic racism of a place can exclude Black, Indigenous and people of color, impacting the body.

Four poems in *Thrown in the Throat* share the title “The Language in Question,” in which Garcia explores the restrictions of linguistic structures. The first uses animal life as a metaphor in order to emphasize imperialism: *The language in question likes conquest // moves west because it hungers like... / the larvae of the caddisfly*. In lakes and rivers, caddisfly larvae create protective cases for their bodies, using silk

secreted from glands on either side of their mouths to incorporate sand, bits of leaves, rock, bark, shell and other material onto the outsides of the tubes that surround them. Camouflaged, they are able to function and impact the systems around them largely undetected. Garcia wields the caddisfly and other metaphors brilliantly to highlight the “worming” nature of colonial language. “Ah-dee-ose // ah-me-goes,” he writes, concluding the first poem of the series by demonstrating the severing effect “when the accent doesn't even come close” — how systems of privilege force English to remain, most often, the language in question.

Thrown in the Throat's poems personify plants with remarkable traits to imagine ways out of limiting narratives. In “Ode to the Pitcher Plant,” for example, a plant known for being carnivorous — seducing and drowning prey with its nectar-filled pitfall trap — self-identifies as pansexual and gender-fluid: a “three headed // head giver” waving its spade “for any lad or lass.” In the traditional nature poem, landscape often serves as a backdrop against which to explore and define a sense of self. But Garcia's plants speak with their own voices, critiquing the social norms that limit human life. These odes read as celebrations of kink, of queerness, of “maneaters” and drag queens. They demand “a better name for when women climax.” Celebratory, empowering and explorative in nature, Garcia's poems expose the link between compulsory monogamy and hetero and cis normativity, with systemic social control.

In *Thrown in the*

Throat, Garcia uses figurative closets as sites of both entrapment and transformation, most evidently in “Conversations with my Father // a Poem in Closet Verse,” and “The Great Glass Closet.” In the first, double dashes separate two columns on the page: The left column represents the father's comments, the right includes the speaker's replies. The divisions emphasize the closeted queerness of the speaker while he communicates with his father: “When was the last time / you took a girl to the movies // it's been a long time / since I've seen a movie.” Conversations avoiding queerness snake across the page, sidestepping the obvious. The closeting of the speaker's identity exists loudly within the white space.

In a long prose poem, “The Great Glass Closet,” the speaker compares himself to Harry Potter for sleeping beneath his family's clothes; he identifies the trunk of a car as “a kind of closet” for an uncle on crutches, who “couldn't cross the border / by foot;” he also compares closets to prisons — to places where one is closed-in and forced to “(open) what (they can).” This speaker, occupying multiple closets, opened books: “Reading, I learned the difference ... between *close* meaning to *shut*, and *close*, meaning *almost there*.” The relationship between *close* and *close* might act as a thesis to this text, where the same tools used to create and define distances can also be repurposed to survive them. ✨

Thrown in the Throat

Benjamin Garcia

80 pages, softcover: \$16

Milkweed Editions, 2020

Krystal Quiles / HCN



‘One hell of a testimony’

Kelli Jo Ford's debut novel, *Crooked Hallelujah*, is a lyrical account of faith and family.

BY ALEX TRIMBLE YOUNG



IN LIEU OF A TRADITIONAL author portrait, the “about” page of Cherokee writer Kelli Jo Ford’s website features a curious snapshot of a highway winding through a red-rock canyon. On the left side of the road, a brown highway sign reads “INDIAN WRITING,” with an arrow pointing right, presumably toward petroglyphs carved in the nearby towering sandstone cliffs. Between the arrow and the ancient rock carvings, however, stands Ford herself, scribbling away in a notebook. The caption reads: “How. Did. They. Know.”

Ford is poking fun at the idea that Indigenous writing is an artifact of the past tethered to a romanticized Western landscape. She transforms “writing” from a static noun into an active verb, happening now, sustained by Indigenous writers all over the continent, including, with this debut novel, Ford herself.

In her “novel in stories” entitled *Crooked Hallelujah*, Ford refuses to reduce her work to an exposition of Cherokee identity for non-Indigenous audiences. Instead, in a voice at once critical and empathetic, Ford paints strikingly candid portraits of four generations of Cherokee women in all their human complexity, rather than reducing them to figures in a political allegory. The result is a book that is — to borrow Ford’s own deceptively poetic turn of phrase — “One hell of a testimony.”

Ford’s tale of female kinship resonates with Cherokee society’s traditional matrilineal structure. But as Ford explains in an interview with *The Missouri Review*, while her main characters are Cherokee, the story isn’t “about them being Cherokee.” Instead, Ford says, “at its heart, *Crooked Hallelujah* is about the relationships between mothers and daughters.”

This family saga opens on the teenaged Justine living with her mother, Lula, and unnamed grand-

mother in a fictional town in Sequoyah County, Oklahoma. Justine is raped on an illicit date with a man she met on a school trip. She subsequently gives birth to a daughter, Reney, but her shame and fear prevent her from confiding in her mother about how she became pregnant. Lula and the family’s church congregation blame Justine for the sin of having premarital sex. The scandal that follows threatens to alienate Justine from her mother and the entire family from the church that ties them to their community.

As its title suggests, *Crooked Hallelujah* centers on its characters’ complicated relationship to Christianity. Like Ford herself, Justine, Lula and Lula’s mother grew up in The Holiness Church, a charismatic Protestant denomination with a puritanical approach to earthly pleasures and to Indigenous traditions. “They believed Stomp Dances were of the devil, that God healed what was meant to be healed, and children obeyed,” Justine says. Ford, however, does not linger on the fact that the church is a colonial imposition. Instead, she reveals her protagonists’ demanding faith to be both a poison and a cure in their relationships with each other.

Reflecting on the impacts of her mother’s fervent religiosity on her childhood, which included rules such as wearing ankle-length skirts, avoiding amusement parks and not associating with boys, Justine mourns for “the little girl I was and wonder who she could have been without the Bible, without sickness, without so much by-God loss. But without the things that make us who we are, we’re nothing, I reckon.” For Ford, fundamentalist Christianity, with its vacillation between teachings of extreme renunciation and boundless love, is a bond between these mothers and daughters that cannot easily be disavowed.

Throughout the novel, Ford’s characters find

subtle ways to assert themselves as contemporary Native women. In considering her mother’s amateur paintings, Justine notes that “All Mama ever painted was teepees or landscapes of Sequoyah County, the scrubby patch of hills she saw nothing but beauty in.” Though often invoked by white Americans as an anachronistic and inaccurate metonymy for all Indigenous experiences, teepees were not historically used by Cherokees. In Lula’s hands, however, their image becomes an assertion of Indigenous identity by a woman who has been all but severed from her own tribal traditions. Likewise, in her romantic depictions of the underappreciated landscapes of eastern Oklahoma, Lula finds beauty in the land that the U.S. government originally allocated for the Cherokee Nation’s presumed decline.

Walking the line between novel and short story collection produces some choppy transitions in *Crooked Hallelujah*, especially when the narrative takes an abrupt and cryptic turn toward the apocalyptic in its concluding story. But perhaps Ford is not after a neatly finished tale. Her commitment to telling stories that are hard to tell, in all their pain and complexity, makes for a lyrical account of life. Toward the end of the novel, Justine is surprised when Reney, having moved to Oregon for college, starts “asking questions about ‘her Cherokee heritage’ when she called home, wanting to hear old stories. Justine had stories aplenty; few that she cared to tell. Nonetheless, she found herself telling them all.” ☀

Crooked Hallelujah

Kelli Jo Ford

304 pages, hardcover: \$26

Grove Press, 2020

Heard Around the West

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.

BY BETSY MARSTON

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Much like “a teenager, curious and bold,” said Yellowstone biologist Doug Smith, a young wolf in the national park’s Hayden Valley became fascinated by a family picnicking near the Yellowstone River. Now the Missouri family has a wild story to tell once they get home — as does, no doubt, the wolf. As the entranced animal ventured closer, the parents, Michael and Ashley VanZant, moved nearer to their 1-year-old, who was in a baby carriage, while their other children, 5 and 10, climbed the picnic table to watch. Then the unexpected happened: The wolf suddenly leaped over a log “and ran straight toward the VanZants before stopping 5 feet away,” reports the *Billings Gazette*. At that point, Michael said, he thought about using his .380 pistol. His wife, however, had already started throwing sticks, one of which hit the wolf, which growled. Michael then grabbed a large branch and waved it at the wolf, and the animal slowly retreated and finally ran off. “It was like he was as confused as we were for a little bit,” Michael said. “It was scary, but at the same time it was awesome.” Smith noted that the inquisitive wolf was a member of the Wapiti Pack, “the most exposed to humans of any in the world,” and one of the most well-known and photographed.

In other Yellowstone news, *Newsweek* reports that Jackson, Wyoming, resident Michael Daus had his own close encounter, when he watched a young bison and a grizzly bear “squaring off” near the Grand Prismatic Overlook Trail. For five minutes, Daus recorded their battle on his iPhone. First, the juvenile



bison charged the bear. Undeterred, the grizzly attacked it and dragged it down, killing it on the banks of a river. The bison was likely just a few months old, but apparently the bear did not ask to see its ID.

WYOMING

Hats off to Jackson, Wyoming, which recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of the town’s “petticoat rulers,” who governed from 1920 to 1923. A century ago, Jackson was notorious as a lawless settlement and refuge for criminals, so its choice of a “lady-led” government made the national press. Especially newsworthy was the appointment of 5-foot-tall Pearl Williams as marshal, in large part because she owned a horse, reports *Atlas Obscura*. Williams told the *Jackson Hole Courier* in 1921 that she anticipated

no problems as “she killed three men and buried them herself, and she hasn’t had no trouble with anybody since.” Her main task wasn’t corralling ornery outlaws so much as kicking out the cattle and pigs that were fouling the town square. During her three years as boss, Mayor Grace Miller and her team whipped the town into shape, collecting past-due taxes and putting Jackson in the black, grading streets, installing electric lights and buying land for a cemetery. Yet these days, reports the Center for American Women and politics, Wyoming ranks 48th in the nation for female representation in the state Legislature, a reminder, perhaps, that “momentum is never guaranteed.”

ALASKA

Most of us would consider it

unsporting to bait bears — or anything else — with doughnuts saturated with bacon grease. Such “hunting” amounts to shooting anything that gets into the garbage. And how many of us would seek out a winter den of hibernating black bears and their cubs, spotlight and blind them before shooting the still-groggy animals? Is it really sporting for hunters in motorboats to gun down caribou trying to swim to safety, or to blast wolves or coyotes and their just-weaned pups in their dens? The Obama administration banned these kinds of “sport hunting” on federal public lands in Alaska in 2015, but someone with unusual clout succeeded in ending that policy this summer: Donald Trump Jr., an “avid hunter” according to *The New York Times*. Trump Jr. wanted Alaska’s permissive hunting rules to take precedence over the federal government’s, and thanks to his pull (and his dad’s), 20 million acres of Alaska’s national preserves are now vulnerable to the state’s expanded definition of hunting. Trump Jr. was joined by Safari Club International as well as Alaska Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan, who told the *Guardian* that the change was needed “not only as a matter of principle, but as a matter of states’ rights.” Humane Society staff attorney Laura Smythe lambasted Alaska for its support of “extremely cruel killing methods,” and Theresa Pierno, who leads the National Parks Conservation Association, added, “We have never opposed hunting, but this can hardly be considered hunting.” Let’s hope no one invites Trump Jr. to the zoo; he may not understand that it’s not a shooting gallery. 🌲

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#IAM THE WEST

ISRAEL BAYER

**Director, the International Network of
Street Papers North America
Portland, Oregon**

I remember a high school English teacher coming to me, and she was just, like, "Whatever you do, you've got to get out of here, because if you don't get out of here you're just gonna be another statistic." I quit school in the 11th grade. I was raised by a single mother and had experienced poverty most of my life. The West was an opportunity to re-create myself and not be bound to fate as a high school dropout. It offered me hope. I was a convenience store clerk, social worker, and ultimately got into journalism. Being able to tell people's stories on the margins, of people experiencing poverty and homelessness, became a calling for me for the rest of my life. This idea of rugged individualism is a myth. In reality, we all need one another.

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