

# High Country News

## THE ROUGH ROAD AHEAD



A tasing death in  
a small town

Red alert for  
Colorado River

Poet Alberto  
Ríos on Nogales

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Homes on the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Reservation in the Quinn River Valley, with the Santa Rosa Mountains rising in the background, in Humboldt County, Nevada. **Russel Albert Daniels / HCN**

# Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See [hcn.org](http://hcn.org) for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, [hcn.org](http://hcn.org). For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or [editor@hcn.org](mailto:editor@hcn.org), or call 970-527-4898.



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## EDITOR'S NOTE



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# Hope on the border

**I THINK OF THIS ISSUE** as a sort of progress report on three of the biggest issues facing the Western United States: climate change, homelessness and the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Barely a week into his administration, President Joe Biden hit pause on selling leases for oil and gas drilling on public lands. Of course, as Carl Segerstrom tells us, old hands in the West are fully aware that doesn't mean the drilling will stop. It does, however, signal a welcome shift in policy.

It's a change that comes not a moment too soon. In February, for the first time ever, the drought plan for the Colorado River Basin was triggered for the Upper Basin states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico. One official who spoke to writer Nick Bowlin had two words to describe what this means for the millions of people who rely on the river and its reservoirs: "red alert."

American farmers of Punjabi origin in California's Central Valley don't need an alert. Some of them are already losing their farms. Wufei Yu profiles a vibrant community that has survived for over a century despite discrimination, only to now face possible defeat by drought.

Correspondent Leah Sottile examines how we criminalize being unhoused through the story of the life and death of an Oregon man caught in a cycle of homelessness and persecuted by the police. What started out as a traffic stop ended in a tasing death. Why did James Plymell have to die?

Jessica Kutz brings us a story about the border wall that offers something new: hope. As part of a series *High Country News* did with Arizona Public Media, Kutz chronicles the human rights and environmental advocates who dream of what the Borderlands could look like in this new world. (*Read the rest of the series at hcn.org.*) These activists, she writes, hope to make it "a place of restoration instead of destruction, a place of refuge instead of fear."

In this issue's Facts & Figures department, Jonathan Thompson breaks down the numbers on the border wall, contrasting what was promised to what is there now. Meanwhile, Arizona Poet Laureate Alberto Ríos reminds us that the Borderlands are about much more than a wall. There's humor and humanity there, too. And that's always a good thing to remember.

**Katherine Lanpher**, interim editor-in-chief

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## FEATURE

# Did James Plymell Need to Die?

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The criminalization of homelessness in the semi-urban West.

*Note: This story contains images of a recently deceased person.*

BY LEAH SOTTILE

## ON THE COVER

Balbir Singh drives a tractor in Karm Baim's orchard in Gridley, California, where Punjabi American people have farmed for more than a century. **McNair Evans / HCN**

James Plymell lies dead on a residential street in Albany, Oregon, after he had been repeatedly tased by Albany Police officers (above). **Albany Police Department via a public records request**

Workers employed by Southwest Valley Constructors smooth the concrete base on the Mexican side of the new and taller barrier being installed just east of Lukeville, Arizona, in September 2019 (right). **Ash Ponders**



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BY CAITLIN O'HARA / 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](mailto:editor@hcn.org).**

### LIFE AFTER COAL

Jessica Kutz's article about coal on the Diné and Hopi lands was both heartbreaking and uplifting ("Life After Coal," February 2021). What a perfect place, generally and geographically, for the new Biden administration to walk its talk about supporting Indigenous nations while addressing climate change by fully enabling, with federal funds, the transition to carbon-neutral energy that is already beginning with the Kayenta project.

**Don McKenzie**  
Seattle, Washington

### QUEERS, ALPACAS, GUNS

Just finished "Queers, alpacas, guns" (February 2021). It is why I love HCN. Great example of how sometimes you just have to show up and find what is out there — how people learn to coexist where least expected. Keep up the good work.

**Patricia West**  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

I am writing to thank you for Eric Siegel's piece about the Tenacious Unicorn transgender alpaca farm. As an East Coast city-dweller, I am surely not the target audience, but it definitely struck close to home. I grew up in a small town in the country but left because I couldn't see a future there as a queer trans person. Someday, I hope to return to my rural roots. Stories like this give me hope and inspiration that there is a place for us, too — if we are tenacious enough! Thank you for putting this out there.

**Elana Redfield**  
Brooklyn, New York

I'm a recent subscriber, and while I love the magazine generally, I have to express special admiration for Eric Siegel and Luna Anna Archey's "Queers, alpacas and guns." It often seems there is a consensus that certain communities can only find homes in either our urban or our rural spaces, but not both. This has never actually been true, and articles like this remind us that "blue vs. red" and other arti-

ficial divides can create rifts between communities that don't need to exist. It's always worth the effort to tell the stories that provide a truer narrative.

**Jeff Hall**  
Seattle, Washington

### HOUSING CHALLENGES

The problems revealed in your interview with Jackie Fielder ("Is it time to decolonize the housing market?" February 2021) are as real as they have been for the history of our nation. The pandemic and the renter problems it has caused and magnified are huge and absolutely impossible to ignore.

If we don't answer the challenge and start treating housing as a right and not an entitled privilege, our society will fail. As skeptical as I have always been about meeting the needs of those without, I am more optimistic at this point that we are at the start of a new and better economy and society. Some of that optimism comes from interviews like yours. Reading that Fielder is out there saying clearly what needs to happen keeps me on the right track. Thanks to you both.

**Tim Funk**  
Crossroads Urban Center  
Salt Lake City, Utah

### WINDS OF CHANGE

Thank you for *High Country News* in general and especially your recent article on the winds of change ("Pro-Trump riots won't stop the winds of political change blowing in the West," 1/11/21, web-only). As an Idaho Democrat, it is very helpful to hear this right now. I hope some of those winds blow this way, and we can build a coalition to do the hard work that Arizona and Georgia have done.

**Gail Rankin**  
McCall, Idaho

### A MOVING ESSAY

The January issue caught my attention, touching on issues with historical and current causes in my areas of interest. The best was the essay by Kimberly Myra Mitchell ("Through wildland firefighting,

finding a space to heal"). I won't try to put into words the emotions I felt as I finished reading it! I cried.

**Tommy Tomlin**  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

### A DELICATE BALANCE

Kudos on Nick Bowlin's well-written, level-headed, even-handed article ("Second Citizens," January 2021). As a Colorado native who has lived in the Gunnison Valley for over 27 years, I have paid close attention to the delicate balance between classes, lifestyles and valued labor input, and the efforts to keep this valley viable economically while also welcoming both the adventurous mountain lover, struggling to survive with looming gentrification, and the folks with wealth. It is crucial that we find a way to maintain this delicate balance — to protect ranching (without which we would become Vail), the wealthy and those hanging on to the ability to pay modest rent while working marginally compensated jobs. This article encapsulates the struggles we face to pull this off.

If only everyone here could/would read your article. It does wonders to clarify the sometimes-warring influences. Thank you for being part of the resolution of these.

**Laine Ludwig**  
Gunnison, Colorado

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*"If we don't  
answer the  
challenge and  
start treating  
housing as a  
right and not  
an entitled  
privilege,  
our society  
will fail."*

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## CORRECTIONS

In our story, "Life After Coal" (February 2021), we erroneously reported that the Salt River Project paid \$110 million to the Navajo Nation. It was one of multiple stakeholders that paid the \$110 million, which was part of an extension lease signed when the plant was closed. In "Remembering William Kittredge," we included a photo of Lake Abert, noting it was in the Warner Valley, when, in fact, it is northwest of it. In the photo caption with the story "Mountaintop removal threatens traditional Blackfoot territory," the mine shown is in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, not Alberta. In the January issue's 50th anniversary pages looking back on the 1990s, we stated that President Bill Clinton took office in January 1992 rather than January 1993. We regret the errors.

## A good bet for health

The importance of foreign-born doctors comes into focus during the pandemic.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

**DR. AMIR QURESHI HAS HARDLY** had a minute to himself since the COVID-19 pandemic set off a world-wide medical scramble last year. Most days, he works a 12-hour shift, consulting on patients with the virus or other infections like pneumonia. “I’m sometimes exhausted, sometimes frustrated,” Qureshi

said. “And there is a human side to it, too.” He’s missed out on time with his wife and three school-aged children, and he finds it difficult not knowing when the crisis will be over.

Qureshi works just down the street from Caesars Palace on the famed Las Vegas Strip — the only infectious disease specialist at the

293-bed Desert Springs Hospital Medical Center in Las Vegas, Nevada. His services have always been in demand, but the pandemic has brought a heightened level of urgency. Last July, during the second peak of infections, hospital staff were treating from 40 to 60 patients at a time, while ICU beds were always in short supply.

Las Vegas is lucky to have him. Nevada, like many other Western states, is facing a shortage of doctors — a problem that is only going to get worse. By 2030, New Mexico, Nevada, Montana, Idaho and Arizona will suffer some of the worst physician shortages in the country, according to recent projections by the public health journal *Human Resources for Health*.

Distribution is one problem: There have always been higher concentrations of doctors on the coasts. Then, a decade ago, the

Affordable Care Act increased demand for medical care by insuring over 20 million people across the country. But as the U.S. population ages, its doctors do as well; in New Mexico, 37% of doctors are expected to retire in the next decade, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

To fill these gaps in health care, hospitals rely on medical professionals born abroad. Through a visa waiver program called the Conrad 30, states like Nevada are able to lure foreign-born physicians to work in underserved areas in exchange for the chance to stay after they’ve completed graduate school in the U.S. “They’re providing services to the whole population, but specifically, they’re here to try to plug the holes for those most in need,” said Gerald Ackerman, director of Nevada’s Office of Rural



Dr. Amir Qureshi at Desert Springs Hospital in Las Vegas, Nevada.  
**Bridget Bennett / HCN**

Health. As the country struggles to cope with the pandemic, they are filling a crucial role in both rural and urban areas across the West.

**WHEN QURESHI CAME TO** the U.S. from Karachi, Pakistan, at the age of 24, the country was dealing with a different epidemic. It was the early 1990s, and the AIDS crisis had swept through the nation. Facing a shortage of doctors, the U.S. did what it has done before: It loosened visa restrictions. “That’s when the floodgates opened for the foreign doctors,” Qureshi said. “(It’s) another example of foreign doctors coming to the rescue.”

Qureshi estimates that nearly a quarter of his classmates — about 100 physicians from the Dow Medical College in Karachi alone — were granted visas. Qureshi started his own residency at the sprawling St. Luke’s Roosevelt Hospital in New York City.

It was an exciting time for Qureshi. From the window of his 30th floor apartment, he remembers being able to see the World Trade Center. He found the city fascinating; its culture and customs were so different from what he’d known before. “A lot of things were new to me, let’s put it that way,” he chuckled. He looked forward to advancing his medical career, even as he worried about becoming infected with HIV. “At that time, you know, obviously, the biggest worry was getting stuck by a needle,” he said. “Thank God, I never did.”

After completing his residency program and fellowship training, he moved to North Las Vegas in 1998 under the Conrad 30 program to serve in a hospital with a high volume of Medicare and Medicaid patients. At the time, he says, people were flying in from all over the world to experience the gambling and glamour of that bustling desert city. Most of the doctors he worked with also came from other countries; in Nevada today, nearly a quarter of physicians and 37% of nurses are immigrants.

Three years after coming to

Las Vegas, he decided to stay. Eventually, he became a U.S. citizen. Though he’s no longer required to work with underserved populations in lieu of a visa, many of his patients are lower-income, sometimes traveling miles to his hospital from rural areas like Pahrump, Nevada, or Bullhead City, Arizona.

The Conrad 30 program has had its problems. Whenever labor is seen as an exportable commodity — something you can turn on-and-off with barely a moment’s notice — exploitation tends to follow. In 2007, the *Las Vegas Sun* published an investigation revealing that some physicians were being taken advantage of, working long hours with less pay than they had been promised. “In some cases, the employers would threaten them and say, ‘You are here because of me. If you don’t do what I say, I’ll get you deported,’” Qureshi said. But Nevada passed legislation to address the issue, and Qureshi, who

now serves in an advisory role for the program, says it doesn’t happen anymore.

**HAVING YOUR VISA TIED** to your job is difficult for other reasons, especially now that tighter immigration restrictions and a backlog of applicants have made obtaining citizenship much more difficult. In 2017, under the Conrad 30 program, Dr. Kamalika Roy moved to rural Oregon to work as a psychiatrist after completing her residency and fellowship in Michigan. Originally from Kolkata, India, Roy now works for the Oregon State Hospital in Salem, as well as for a rural hospital a 100-mile drive from her home. As part of her contract, she also teaches at a university and spends hours on the phone with adults who need psychiatric help. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted her patients greatly. Now that nursing homes are in lockdown, residents’ dementia symptoms are getting



worse. “The group treatment totally was shattered due to COVID-19,” she said. And without family visitation and with staff in quarantine, “there is no daily structured routine for psychiatric patients anymore.”

Despite the important work she does, Roy’s ability to live in the U.S. remains in constant limbo. Many hospitals have been forced to lay off staff, owing to the financial strains caused by the pandemic. Roy is not a permanent resident, so if she were to be laid off, she would have just one month to find a new job, or else return to India. Under the Trump administration, the visa renewal process became even more complicated; renewals were previously good for three years, but now sometimes they are only effective for one year. Meanwhile, the application alone takes 6 to 8 months to complete. “It’s stressful in the sense that you cannot focus on anything,” she said. “We don’t buy good houses here, because we don’t know how long we’ll stay here.”

Doctors like Roy also face a huge backlog for green cards — up to a 50-year wait made longer by the growing number of Indian nationals seeking Silicon Valley jobs in IT and technology, according to *The Washington Post*. Many of Roy’s colleagues have moved to Canada instead, where they are immediately granted permanent residency. Roy thinks it’s illogical for the U.S. to make everything so difficult; after all, taxpayer money funded part of her education. If she leaves the U.S., it will be Canada or Australia’s gain. “It doesn’t help anybody,” she said. “It doesn’t help me at all. But it also does not help America as a country.”

In some ways, Qureshi was luckier: He was able to hit the supply-and-demand pulse of visas and citizenship when he moved here 30 years ago. He’s happy in Las Vegas but remains grateful to Pakistan for subsidizing his medical education. And, in some ways, he thinks the U.S. should be grateful too.

“I say this without mincing my words,” he said. “The city of Las Vegas would not have survived without foreign doctors.” 🌸

# Rural remedy

A virtual telementoring program helps the West respond to the pandemic.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

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**IN THE 1990S**, a New Mexico woman learned that she was suffering from hepatitis C, a viral disease that infects the liver. Though she had insurance, she did not seek treatment because of the lack of specialists in her area. When her abdominal pain intensified, however, she got on a long waitlist, hoping to be helped by Dr. Sanjeev Arora, a gastroenterologist, at his clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 2001, she and her two children travelled over 200 miles to meet with him. But by then it was too late, and six months later, the woman died. Arora was shocked that people were dying of a curable disease in the United States — and even more shocked that it kept happening. “These people were dying because the right knowledge didn’t exist at the right place at the right time,” he said.

That woman’s death was needless, yet because of Arora’s response to the tragedy, thousands of patients in communities with health-care access gaps can now get treatment. In 2003, Arora created a virtual telemonitoring program called Project ECHO. Unlike traditional telemedicine — where virtual appointments take place between a patient and doctor — the program connected specialists like Arora with physicians in rural areas and those working at state prisons. This enabled Arora and his team to train primary care doctors across New Mexico on how to treat individual cases of hepatitis C through weekly remote sessions that expanded his reach.

Over the years, Arora adapted

ECHO to treat dozens of medical issues, including opioid addiction and hantavirus outbreaks; he also developed a program for miners’ wellness, aimed at helping coal and uranium miners and workers in the nuclear weapons industry. By “democratizing knowledge,” as Arora puts it, Project ECHO grew. The model overcame barriers unique to the region, like a shortage of physicians and the great distances between rural communities and health-care services.

All the while, Arora and his team — and specialists across the West — had no idea they were building a virtual infrastructure that would later save lives when the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived.

**PRIOR TO COVID-19**, the model was already being adapted in new ways. Project ECHO specialists in Reno, Nevada, for example, helped mental health professionals diagnose behavioral health conditions and treat patients with schizophrenia across the state. “(It’s) really about identifying those people early on and getting them to these services quickly,” Troy Jorgensen, program manager of Project ECHO Nevada, told me. In Laramie, Wyoming, Project ECHO was used to improve education outcomes for students with disabilities. “We had just two staff members who were traveling around the state year after year to provide training and technical assistance,” said Sandra Root-Elledge, executive director of the Wyoming Institute for Disabilities. Project ECHO provided a way to

expand the reach of those staff members.

When the pandemic hit, Project ECHO programs pivoted to tackle new challenges. The ECHO team in Wyoming changed its curriculum to address the challenges of virtual learning, bringing in speakers who could discuss how to create a daily classroom structure at home. “We’ve got families who are now working from home, their kids are all at home, and they’re trying to balance everything that’s going on in their life,” said Wendy Warren, program manager for ECHO in education. “For students with autism, frequently it’s that change in routine, which is very difficult for them.”

Nevada’s Project ECHO hub, too, adapted existing programming to treat COVID-19. “We were able to shift when the pandemic happened, and everybody started working from home,” Jorgensen said. “We already knew how to use Zoom, we already were very comfortable with that and working in a virtual space.” A training on antibiotic resistance that had been led by an

infectious disease expert moved to address the transmission and treatment of COVID-19. At the onset of the crisis in Nevada, attendance for that training skyrocketed, with 100 participants Zooming in weekly from around the state. A critical care specialist joined the discussion, offering advice on techniques like how to “prone” patients, a term for turning patients onto their stomachs, a common tactic for those who are having difficulty breathing.

A model that grew out of a need in rural New Mexico is now leading trainings nationally to address urgent issues like vaccine hesitancy and the spread of COVID in nursing homes. Arora and Project ECHO are also working with the World Health Organization on a new global vaccination initiative to equitably distribute the vaccine. “Because, ultimately, what is the goal of ECHO?” Arora told me recently by Zoom. “(It’s) social justice: At the heart of ECHO is the idea that with this much inequity in the world, it is almost impossible for us to have peace and harmony amongst people.” ☀

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*“These people were dying because the right knowledge didn’t exist at the right place at the right time.”*

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# Public land is no longer for sale to fossil fuel companies

A new executive order pauses oil and gas leasing and signals a major shift in federal land policy.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

**ON JAN. 27**, President Joseph Biden planted a continent-sized “not for sale” sign on the public lands and waters managed by the federal government. In an executive order — part of a sweeping set of orders focused on climate change — Biden directed Interior Secretary nominee Deb Haaland to reassess the federal oil and gas leasing system and, at least for now, to pause the sale of development rights to private companies.

The move upends the bipartisan status quo of selling vast stretches of the Western U.S. to fossil fuel companies. Currently, those companies hold leases to more than 26 million acres, more than half of which have yet to be drilled. (About 10% of that untapped land was either auctioned off at the minimum bid price of \$2 per acre or sold post-auction for even less by the Trump administration, according to Bureau of Land Management data compiled by The Wilderness Society.)

That means that the pause on new leases won’t end drilling on federal lands. “We have a deep inventory of approved federal drilling permits in hand that essentially cover all of our desired activity over the next presidential term,” said David Harris, an executive vice president for Devon Energy Corporation, a major leaseholder in New Mexico’s Permian Basin, speaking on an investor call in October. “The dirty little secret is (a moratorium) may not have much of an immediate impact on production,” said Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center.

Still, pumping the brakes on the sale of federal fossil fuels marks a major policy shift. It sets the stage for a transition away from fossil fuel development, which has had major impacts on air pollution, water quality and wildlife in the

Western U.S. It also could put a major dent in climate warming emissions; fossil fuel production on federally managed land accounts for more than one-fifth of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States. In the short term, however, it will hurt the Western states and workers that depend on the industry’s revenue and jobs.

**THE OIL AND GAS** leasing moratorium cuts off one important source of income for Western states. They won’t entirely lose revenue from federal fossil fuels: While no new leases will be sold, drilling under existing leases — and the accompanying royalties and other taxes — will continue. But the states will lose the income from bonus bids on federal leases, which come when oil and gas companies drive up the auction price of certain parcels with particularly promising deposits. While bonus bids are typically much smaller than royalties, they can bring huge paydays: In 2018, one frenzied round of lease sales in southeastern New Mexico brought in nearly \$1 billion in bonus bids.

Meanwhile, the federal government will reassess the federal oil and gas leasing program. In a press release, the Interior Department stated that the goal of the leasing freeze is to “provide a path to align the management of America’s public lands and waters with our nation’s climate, conservation, and clean energy goals.”

The moratorium is expected to kick off a multi-year public environmental planning process, during which the public and affected stakeholders, including tribal nations and state and local governments, will have a chance to weigh in on the future of oil and gas leasing. Multiple alternative outcomes will be presented, likely ranging from leaving the program as it is

to ending future leasing completely.

To get an idea of what to expect, it helps to look back at a federal coal moratorium issued in the final year of the Obama administration. In January of 2016, the Bureau of Land Management started a process to evaluate the economic and environmental impacts of leasing federal land for coal mining. Following that initial fact-finding mission, the agency concluded that modernizing the federal coal leasing program was necessary. Proposed options for doing so included raising royalty rates, increasing minimum bids, ending new leases entirely and requiring leaseholders to offset their carbon emissions or fund climate adaptation programs.

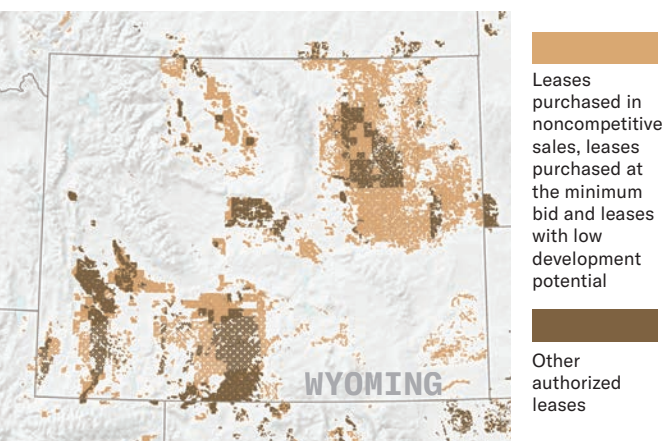
But when Ryan Zinke took the helm of the Interior Department during the Trump administration, he moved quickly to discard the comprehensive review and reopened federal land for coal leasing. (The legality of that move is still being argued in federal court.) Despite efforts to open up more federal land for coal leasing, the industry has continued to nose-dive as bankruptcies mount from Wyoming to Appalachia. Since the coal moratorium was lifted, companies have pulled out of leasing applications for 10 times more coal than they’ve filed for.

**BIDEN’S EXECUTIVE ORDER** will not upset an industry that’s thriving: Domestic oil and gas production has been in a major bust for the past year. Reduced demand during the coronavirus pandemic and price wars between Saudi Arabia and Russia have driven down the price of oil.

At times last summer, there weren’t any active oil and gas drilling rigs in Wyoming. Despite Trump’s “energy dominance” agenda, it wasn’t worth the cost of pumping it out of the ground. Wyoming’s budget suffered from the lost revenue, and public services, including the state Department of Health, endured major budget cuts. (There were, however, some bright spots in a handful of counties and cities, where new wind installations bolstered local budgets.) Now, as Biden takes office, Wyoming has four active rigs — significantly down from 2019, when there were usually 30-plus operating.

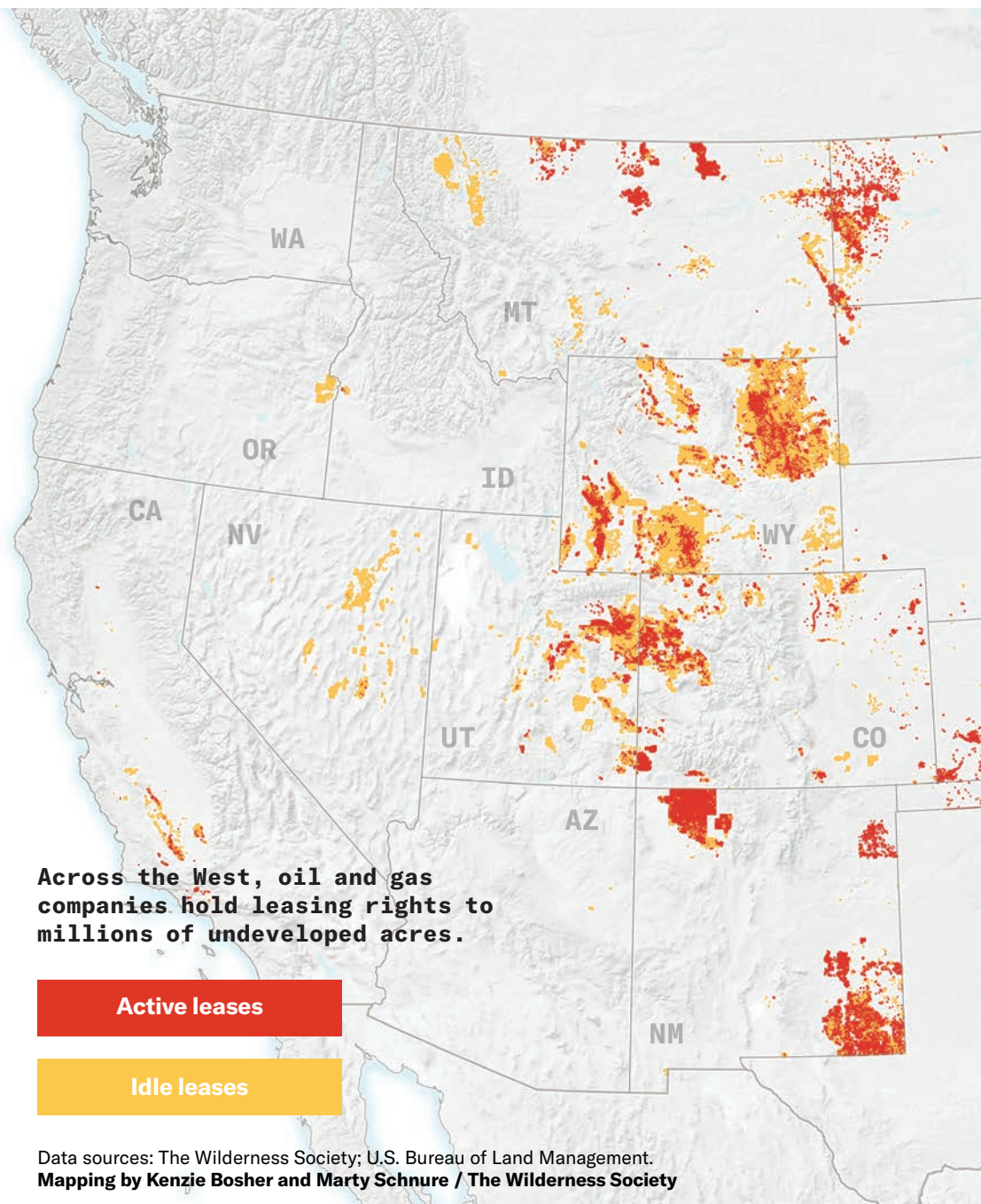
Even as he slammed the executive order as a major blow to Wyoming, Gov. Mark Gordon acknowledged in an interview that international markets are largely responsible for the state’s current lack of oil and gas production. “That’s sort of the nature of the business,” Gordon said. Still, he argued that the delay in leasing and “byzantine federal regulations” mean that companies will look elsewhere in the future, taking jobs and public funding with them: “Capital most likely is going to say, ‘Gee, we love Texas, because we don’t have to deal with any of that BS,’” Gordon said.

**Bargain leasing rates allow rampant speculation on land with little development potential.**



The new executive order sets up a tug of war over the future of fossil fuel production on public lands. It's one that's likely to last throughout the Biden administration: Oil and gas industry interests are already suing over the freeze. In a lawsuit filed the same day the order was signed, the Western Energy Alliance (WEA), a regional oil and gas lobbying group, argued that the order exceeded presidential authority and overrides existing laws that require regular lease sales of public lands. "Drying up new leasing puts future development as well as existing projects at risk," said Kathleen Sgamma, the president of WEA. (Former Interior Department solicitor John Leshy has argued the Interior Department has "ample legal authority to limit or call a halt to fossil fuel leasing on America's public lands.")

For advocates of climate action and leasing reform, it's encouraging to see major changes starting in the second week of Biden's presidency. "The Biden administration is way out ahead of where the Obama administration was," said Schlenker-Goodrich. "There's an urgency to move forward." 🌱



## THE LATEST

# Jaguar lands lost

### Backstory

Though male jaguars have been documented north of the U.S.-Mexico border in recent decades, no females have been recorded in their native U.S. range since 1963. The Southwest's last jaguars are protected under the Endangered Species Act. In 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated 765,000 acres of "critical habitat" in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, hoping to lure stressed cats northward and expand their range. Opponents called the protections "arbitrary and capricious." ("The tenuous fate of the Southwest's last jaguars," 5/30/16).

### Followup

For years, ranchers complained that the protected habitat contained privately owned agricultural areas and made it harder to obtain grazing permits and build infrastructure like corrals and fences. In late January, a federal judge ruled that New Mexico land would no longer be protected for jaguars. The Center for Biological Diversity responded in a statement: "We will ask the Biden administration to carefully re-designate the jaguar's critical habitat so it can withstand the livestock industry's cynical lawsuits."

-Paige Blankenbuehler



REPORTAGE

# The next mining boom?

The Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe parses the perils and promises of a new lithium mine.

BY MAYA KAPOOR | PHOTOS BY RUSSEL ALBERT DANIELS

**IN THE GREAT BASIN DESERT** of northern Nevada and southern Oregon, Thacker Pass cuts a wide swath of sagebrush and bunch grasses between narrow ribbons of mountain ranges. The region is a caldera — a collapsed volcano — that formed an ancient lakebed. For millennia, Indigenous peoples used the verdant valley as a pathway between their winter and summer homes. Today, the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe’s reservation is located nearby, along with the small agricultural community of Oroville, clusters of buildings surrounded by circular green fields of alfalfa.

The ancient lakebed clays are rich in lithium, and in January, the Bureau of Land Management approved the Thacker Pass lithium mine, an almost two-square-mile open-pit mine that will dig up the nation’s largest-known lithium supply. The mine will be run by Lithium Nevada, a subsidiary of Canadian-owned Lithium Americas. But its approval was rushed through during the coronavirus pandemic, and tribal members, ranchers and environmentalists have concerns about the mine’s potential long-term consequences.

Until now, lithium typically has been

extracted from saline areas, such as Chile’s Atacama Desert, through an evaporative process. A relatively new technique using sulfuric acid to extract it from clay means the West is facing a new mining boom — and Nevada may soon become a global lithium-mining hotspot.

Lithium, the lightest metal, shines silvery when stored in protective oils. (Otherwise, it’s extremely flammable.) That lightness makes lithium ion batteries essential to everything from cellphones, to tablets, to Teslas. Lithium ion batteries also store energy for much longer than other batteries, so they can be important

parts of solar and wind energy systems.

Electrovoltaic, or EV, vehicles are a growing part of efforts to combat climate change. For example, General Motors announced in January that it planned to stop making combustion-engine cars by 2035.

But as anyone with an aging cellphone knows, lithium ion batteries degrade over time. What's more, companies seldom recycle the batteries to reuse the rare metals inside them; it's more cost-effective simply to mine for more.

In the Western U.S., companies are rushing to develop lithium mines, partly because of new extraction methods, but also because the federal government is fast-tracking lithium mining. In 2018, the Interior Department listed lithium as a critical mineral, speeding up the mine permitting process. Last year, the Trump administration weakened and sped up the environmental review process for projects on federal lands, favoring mine approvals. Even as the Biden administration clamps down on

extractive industries — such as by pausing oil and gas leases on public lands and in offshore waters — lithium mining exploration continues apace, part of the nation's plan to wean itself from petroleum-powered cars.

This sped-up approval process makes public participation hard. As early as 2019, the BLM published a notice online that invited public comments on the Thacker Pass project, but included the wrong internet link for information about it. In 2020, the BLM held virtual public meetings about the mine's potential environmental impacts less than a month before the public comment period closed. According to *E&E News*, the environmental review, which is often a multiyear process, took less than a year, with the final public comment period held over the winter holidays.

Although some commenters requested more time, citing the coronavirus pandemic, the Interior Department recommended expediting the mine's approval to support economic recovery. Neither Lithium Nevada nor the BLM's district office agreed to speak to *High Country News* about the project.

Lithium Nevada will work approximately 18,000 acres of BLM land about 26 miles from the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Reservation, in a sea of sagebrush on the Nevada-Oregon border hemmed to the north by the Montana Mountains. The region is the traditional homeland of several related Indigenous nations, including the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Reservation, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation, the

Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe and the Burns Paiute Tribe.

Workers will build the mine 24 hours a day for the first two years. Starting in the second year, actual mining operations — such as digging the open-pit mine, pumping the ore to a processing facility, processing the lithium in industrial scrubbers, hauling waste rock to a stockpile, and trucking in materials to make sulfuric acid — will continue 24 hours a day for four decades. In a region where the average 2019 salary was about \$21,000, Lithium Nevada says the mine's average salary will be nearly quadruple that. The company predicts it will bring approximately 1,000 construction jobs to the region for two years of construction, and employ an operational staff of about 300 until the mine closes. The mine has been approved to run for about 40 years — longer, if the company finds more lithium.

Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribal Councilperson Maxine Redstar hopes the mine will provide well-paid, highly skilled work to the reservation's isolated community of approximately 340 people. But details about those jobs are scarce. Lithium Nevada is working closely with the tribe to do outreach and has worked with Great Basin Community College to develop construction training. In its environmental impact statement, however, it describes plans to bus operational workers in from Winnemucca, an hour away from the mine, where the population is less than 4% Native American.

Throughout 2020, the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe contended with devas-

An existing transmission line passes through the heart of Thacker Pass, following the slope down into the Quinn River Valley below. The Santa Rosa Mountains rise in the background (*opposite*).

Maxine Redstar, chairperson of the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe, poses for a portrait in the lobby of the Tribal Council office (*below left*).

Centuries before Fort McDermitt was built by the U.S. in the 1860s, this area along the Quinn River in the Santa Rosa Mountains was a summer campsite used by the nomadic Paiute and Shoshone (*below right*).





Rancher Edward Bartell fears that the local water table level will drop dramatically once the mine starts operating, and that much of the native wild rye on his Quinn River Valley ranch will dry up.

tating coronavirus infection rates, and Redstar hopes that Lithium Nevada will commit to more community engagement, such as the youth summit and powwow Redstar organized with financial support from the company.

Previously, she worried that the much-needed economic stimulus would come at too high a cost, either to local communities or the environment, impacting native habitat, cultural foods, or the wild game that some tribal members still hunt traditionally. But at a February tribal council meeting, Lithium Nevada reassured Redstar that it will seriously consider any concerns raised by the tribe. “They are going to be doing reclamation every seven years,” Redstar said. “I’m feeling a little bit confident that they are doing everything they can to restore the way it was going to be.” Lithium Nevada also said that it would help identify what kind of professional training tribal members needed in order to be employed at the Thacker Pass mine.

Still, others worry that the tribe doesn’t have enough information about the mine’s possible consequences, good or bad. Tribal Councilmember Billy A. Bell said he only learned about the mine’s approval by the BLM after *High Country News* asked for his comments. “It’s interesting how the tribe didn’t comment” on the project, Bell said. “And it’s too late now.”

This rushed approval process has frustrated local rancher Edward Bartell. Bartell’s family’s — fifth- or sixth-generation ranchers — have run cattle in Thacker Pass for a dozen years. His family’s cattle graze private property, where sturdy Great Basin wild rye sways across acres of land. Bartell believes that the project’s

fast approval means that the BLM relied on the mining company for all the science, and he worries about the mine’s long-term effects on the region’s air and water quality.

Bartell didn’t start out opposed to the mine — in fact, the green energy angle sounded good to him. But as he looked into the potential impacts on his family business, he started to get worried. “My big thing is the BLM hasn’t done any other independent science,” Bartell said.

Bartell has not found direct communications with the company reassuring. For example, in an email sent in November 2019, Alexi Zawadzki, president of Lithium America’s North American operations, told him, “You’ll be pleased to know our operation will use very little water — approximately 2,500 acre-feet of well water per year.” However, when Bartell read the BLM’s final environmental impact statement, he learned that that estimate was for just the first four years of operation. After that, the mine will use twice as much water.

Bartell fears that the water table will drop dramatically.

“It is a big devaluation of land value, if you have productive grassland, like you’re seeing out here, and suddenly it turns into barren dustbowl,” Bartell said. He has asked Lithium Nevada to compensate his business, but to no avail. In February, Bartell sued the BLM for rushing the environmental review.

He also worries about the approximately 5,800 tons of sulfuric acid the mine will eventually produce on-site each day. To make sulfuric acid, Lithium Nevada will ship the necessary chemicals to Winnemucca via rail. From there,

trucks will rumble down quiet roads, making up to 200 trips day and night between the town and mine facility — carrying hazardous materials to the mine’s on-site processing center, and hauling mine products back to the railroad.

“What they’re going to have is more of an industrial facility here than just a mine. It’s going to have a chemical complex as well,” said John Hadder, director of the nonprofit Great Basin Resource Watch. “So there’s a lot of concerns about emissions, air quality, leaks, spills, all that kind of stuff.”

The fast-tracked approval process means that the BLM produced scant details about how the mine will affect rare species or unique habitat. The greater sage grouse, for example, stands to lose thousands of acres of habitat. A sage grouse lek, or courtship area, lies less than a mile from the future mine.

Even federal biologists have expressed concern about the rapid approval process. In a January letter to the BLM, Environmental Protection Agency project manager Jean Prijatel questioned the plan for long-term management after the mine closes down. According to Prijatel, without proper management, the mine will contaminate local groundwater with dangerous heavy metals, in particular a “plume” of antimony, for at least 300 years. Prijatel noted that though the BLM had “conceptual options” to address this plume, it offered no detailed mitigation plans, yet approved the mine anyway. She also questioned how the mine will monitor water pollution or share that information with the public. Prijatel did not respond to a request for comment from *High Country News*, although an EPA representative offered to answer questions provided in writing.

Hadder explained that the mine will eventually be dug deeper than the groundwater level. To keep it dry, the mining company will have to continuously pump water out. When the mine shuts down and the pumping stops, groundwater will seep back in, picking up newly exposed toxins, such as antimony. Lithium Nevada plans to treat groundwater for antimony pollution caused by the mine for several years after it closes. But Hadder worries that the antimony pollution may last far longer. “It has the potential of being an intergenerational pollution source, requiring perpetual management,” he said. “This is something that’s not getting a lot of play. And I think it’s part of the problem with the whole process, in not really giving people a full sense of what could happen.” ☀



Aerial view of the border wall at the Tinajas Altas Mountains near Yuma, Arizona. **John Kurc**

## REPORTAGE

# Biden and the border

Environmental and human rights advocates hope for restoration.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

**OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS**, Ron Pulliam, an ecologist from the small southern Arizona town of Patagonia, has watched as the new border wall construction snaked its way along the U.S.-Mexico border. The border wall was a cornerstone of President Donald Trump's election campaign, and during his term, he built slightly over 450 miles of new wall. Today, over 700 miles of both old and new wall line the nearly 2,000-mile-long border.

When Trump left office, one of the projects still under construction involved dynamiting mountainous terrain in the Coronado National Memorial to build access roads to the border. "That is a really crazy project," Pulliam said, having recently witnessed the destruction. "(They are) basically tearing down a mountain inside the memorial, in a place where it's not going to add to border security at all."

Now that Joe Biden is president, border wall construction has been halted, fulfilling one of the Democrat's own campaign promises. Yet his overarching vision for the Borderlands remains vague. A White House fact sheet about Biden's new immigration bill called for "smart border

controls" that employ technology between ports of entry, which could mean surveillance towers and drones. Still, it is unclear whether he will remove the wall erected by his predecessor.

In the absence of a clear plan, human rights advocates as well as environmentalists like Pulliam hope to have some influence over what happens next. It's part of their plan to reimagine the Borderlands: making the area a place of restoration instead of destruction, a place of refuge instead of fear.

"Any place where you have edges, where we have boundaries and borders, there's always conflict," Pulliam said. "But there's also a great opportunity to do things you can't do elsewhere." Some of the activists' ideas, like leaving existing corridors open for wildlife migration, are fairly pragmatic, while others are more aspirational. But all require the restoration of a region that has been systematically degraded.

**ONE IMMEDIATE ACTION** that over a dozen environmental organizations recommend is the removal of sections of the wall, said Myles Traphagen, a biologist with the nonprofit Wildlands Network — particularly at Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, home to Quitobaquito Springs, and the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. "These (recommendations) are based upon the presence of threatened and endangered species, of places that impede water flow and wildlife movement and places that have Indigenous cultural significance," he explained — areas where animals like the Sonoran pronghorn migrate, or where important cultural sites are located. Other measures Biden could take include opening the floodgates already built into the border wall to allow for wildlife migration and keeping the flood-lighting system off. "They haven't turned on the

high-intensity lighting," Traphagen said. "Well, just don't flip the switch."

If parts of the wall are removed, the damaged landscape will need to be restored. In 2012, Pulliam founded the Borderlands Restoration Network, a nonprofit that undertakes restoration projects to improve wetlands and wildlife habitat. He envisions a federal program like the Depression Era's Civilian Conservation Corps, comprising people from both sides of the border, who could be paid with what's left of the \$15 billion earmarked for wall construction. "We like to think of it as creating a restoration economy," said Pulliam. "That's based on working with the land and water and wildlife in such a way that you actually enhance the conservation of those assets."

Even if Biden begins restoration and wall deconstruction, without legislative changes, the border will remain vulnerable to the political winds of the moment. In 2005, the George W. Bush administration passed the REAL ID Act, which granted a waiver authority for wall construction. That enabled Trump's Department of Homeland Security to waive numerous environmental laws at the border. Legislation has been introduced to repeal the waiver, but so far it has yet to succeed, said Paulo Lopes, a public-lands policy specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "That will be one of our legislative asks," Lopes said. "To basically restore the laws (at the border) that apply everywhere else in this country." President Biden could also ask Congress to rescind \$1.375 billion in funding for border wall construction that was allocated for the 2021 fiscal year.

Vicki Gaubeca, the Tucson-based director of the Southern Border Communities Coalition, wants the new administration to abandon border walls altogether. "A border wall only serves to aggravate a situation," she said. Instead, we should take a serious look at the root causes of migration — problems like climate change — and determine how we can "surge humanitarian resources at the borders," she said. For Gaubeca, it's not just about the wall: Her organization focuses on the impacts of border militarization and on demanding accountability of the U.S. Border Patrol for its abuse of migrants. Now it is urging the incoming administration to shift away from a decades-old "disastrous law enforcement-only approach," she said, and toward "a human-rights-first approach that expands public safety, protects human rights, and welcomes residents and newcomers at the border." ☀

*This story was produced in collaboration with Arizona Public Media.*

# Border barrier boondoggle

Trump’s promised inexpensive, impregnable wall was anything but.

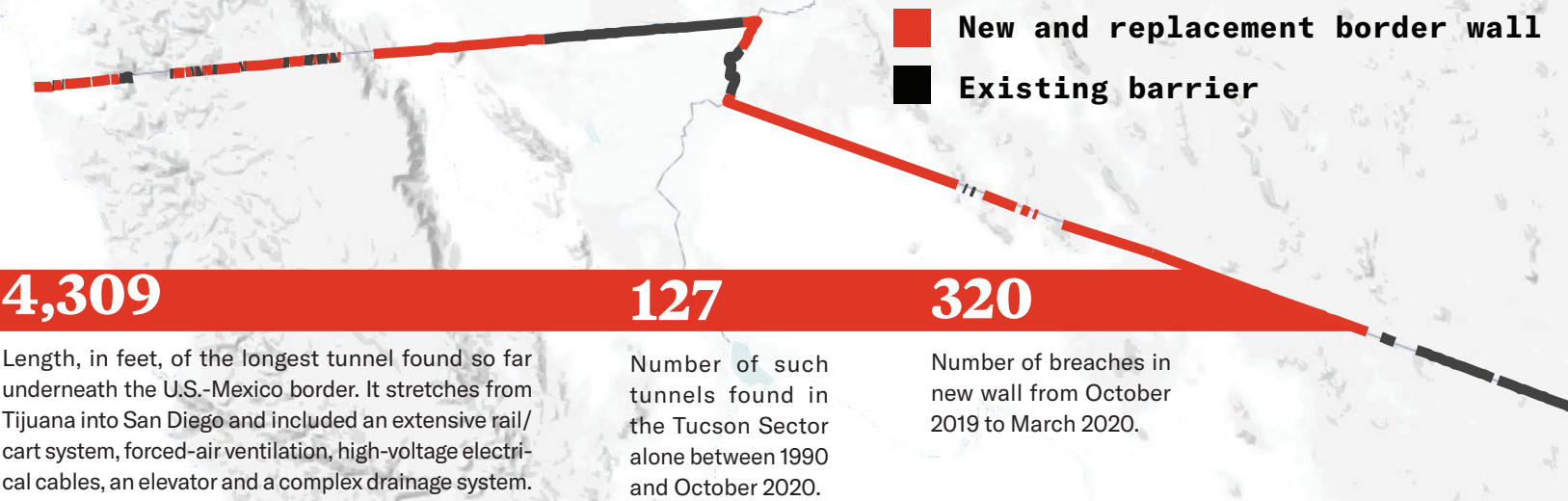
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

**“I WOULD BUILD A GREAT WALL** — and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me. And I’ll build them very inexpensively,” Donald Trump said in 2015 as he announced his presidential run. “I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.” During the campaign, Trump offered more details. His wall would span the entire length of the border, or nearly 2,000 miles, it would be fashioned with concrete — not unlike the Berlin Wall — and would be “impregnable” and “big and beautiful.”

It didn’t quite work out that way. By the end of Trump’s term, his administration had completed construction of about 450 miles of barrier, none of which was concrete and all of which was demonstrably pregnable,

at a cost at least five times that of the existing barriers. Mexico did not pay a dime for it. And the “beautiful” part? That, of course, is in the eye of the beholder.

When Trump first promised to build the wall along the border, he apparently didn’t realize that his predecessors had already constructed hundreds of miles of barriers. It all started in 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act. Fences were constructed in urban areas, such as Nogales and San Diego, with the intention of driving border crossers into the desert, where they could be more easily apprehended — but also where they were at greater risk of dying of heat-related ailments.



**1,954** Length, in miles, of the southern border, which the newly elected president, Donald Trump, planned to line with a “big, beautiful wall” that Mexico would pay for. In 2018, he lowered that to 1,000 miles before pledging to build 450 miles by the end of his first term.

**353; 299** Miles of pedestrian and vehicle barriers, respectively, already existing along the border — covering a total of 652 miles — when Trump was elected.

**694** Miles of border barriers in place as of Dec. 18, 2020, not including secondary fencing.

**\$14.97 billion**  
Amount appropriated by Congress, taken from the Treasury Forfeiture Fund, and funneled from the Department of Defense for border wall construction since 2017.

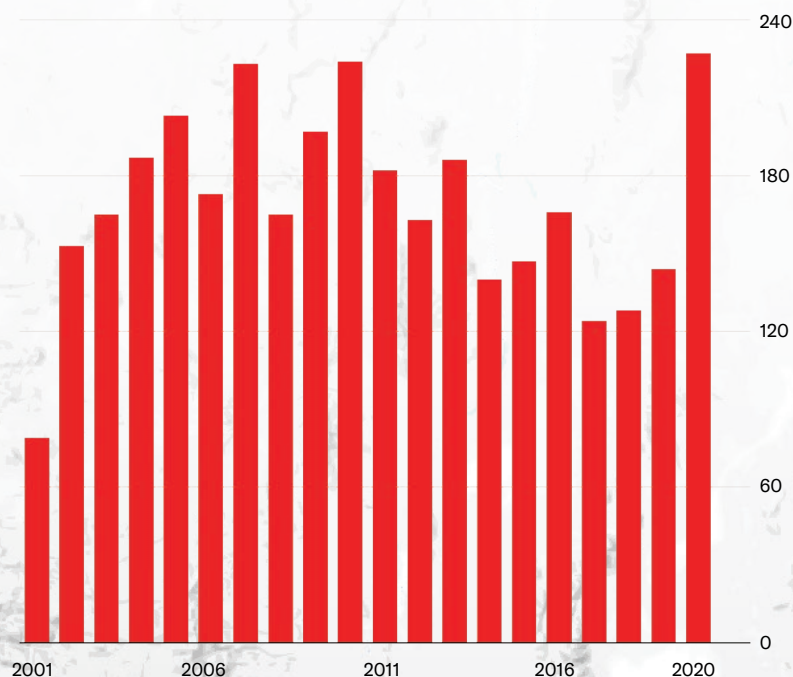
A decade later, President George W. Bush signed the Secure Fence Act of 2006, authorizing the construction of 700 miles of barriers. As a result, 652 miles of pedestrian and vehicle barriers already lined the border, mostly between El Paso and San Diego, by the time Trump was elected. All the evidence, however, suggests that it did very little to stop undocumented migration, in part because at least two-thirds of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. arrived on visas and then overstayed them.

Besides, no wall is truly impregnable, as Trump himself indicated in a speech on the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, when he said: "Let the fate of the Berlin Wall be a lesson to oppressive regimes and rulers everywhere: No Iron Curtain can ever contain the iron will of a people resolved to be free." Oddly enough, "iron curtain" may be the most accurate description of Trump's new segments of the wall.

On the day of his inauguration, President Joseph Biden signed an executive order halting further construction. Now, many observers are urging him to go further and dismantle the barrier, as well as try to repair the damage done. Or, as President Ronald Reagan put it in 1987, "Tear down this wall!" ✨

Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection; Government Accountability Office; Congressional Research Service; National Bureau of Economic Research and Center for Migration Studies; Department of Homeland Security; Southern Border Communities Coalition; Center for Biological Diversity; Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants. **Infographic design: Luna Anna Archey / HCN**

## Migrant remains recovered in Arizona Borderlands, 2001-2020



## 0.4%

Estimated extent by which the 650 miles of barriers built following the Secure Fence Act of 2006 reduced undocumented immigration across the southern border.

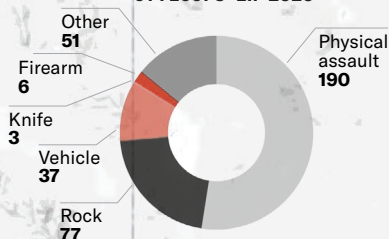
## \$0.28 per year

Amount by which the average low-skill U.S. worker benefited from the decrease in undocumented immigration due to the construction of barriers under the Secure Fence Act.

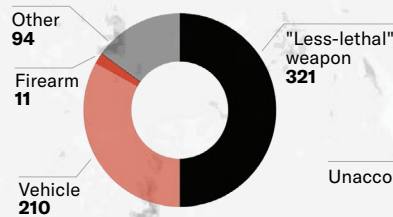
## \$0.19 per year

Amount by which that number would increase if the gaps in the pre-2017 barrier were filled in.

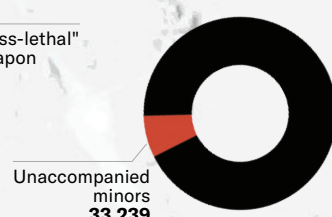
### Assaults on Border Patrol officers in 2020



### Border Patrol officers' use of force on migrants in 2020



### 458,088 migrants were apprehended in 2020



### Private land acquired so far for border construction was purchased at a median of \$13,336



## \$20 million

Minimum cost per mile for barriers replaced or constructed under the Trump administration.

## \$4.4 million

Cost per mile for barriers constructed between 2005 and 2017.

## Jaguar movement corridors

## 93

Approximate number of endangered and imperiled species, including jaguars, Mexican gray wolves and Sonoran pronghorn, affected by border walls, barriers or fences.

## 2,134,792

Acres of critical habitat for imperiled species within 50 miles of the border.



REPORTAGE

## Droughts and wrath

Punjabi American growers fear the loss of their hard-earned farmlands.

BY WUFEI YU | PHOTOS BY MCNAIR EVANS

**ON A BRIGHT** February morning, Kulwant Singh Johl, a third-generation Punjabi American farmer, checked the rain gauge in front of his neat stucco home in Northern California's Yuba-Sutter area. Gusts and drizzles had battered his peach orchard nonstop for a week, but it still wasn't enough to quench the recent drought. "Five inches," he told me by phone. "Way, way below average."

Over the past century, Johl's farm has expanded from just 10 acres to more than 1,000. It's one of the many Punjabi American operations that together produce over 90% of the peaches, two-thirds of the prunes and 20% of the almonds and walnuts grown in the area.

Even Johl, who is better cushioned for tough times than many other farmers, has had to scale down production and tighten his budget. But he fears that thousands of his fellow farmers of Punjabi origin in the Central Valley — especially those who came later and own less land — will fare much worse.

And indeed, the intensifying drought could devastate livelihoods of many multigeneration Punjabi American farmers in California. This year, many may have to sell their hard-earned farm plots and leave an industry that they hold in high esteem.

**IN 1906**, Kulwant's grandfather, Nand Singh Johl, left his farming

household in Punjab, a flat, water-course-laced inland region at the foot of the Himalayas on the Indian subcontinent. He landed in Cascadia, in the Vancouver area, and worked in lumber mills around the U.S.-Canada border. There he encountered discrimination and racist mobs, and by 1908, he'd moved south, to California's Yuba-Sutter area. When he first got a whiff of the pristine loam, he realized he'd discovered a farming nirvana — one that resembled his original home, 7,500 miles west.

Nand Singh Johl helped introduce rice farming to the state and worked hard to obtain his own farmland. But California's Alien Land Law, enacted in 1913,

prevented Asian people from owning and leasing land. So, like hundreds of Punjabis at the time, Nand asked a white friend to rent the property for him, under the friend's name. He bought the 10-acre orchards in the fall of 1946, shortly after the racist restriction was repealed — 24 years before his grandson Kulwant migrated from Punjab to join his family here and keep their farm going.

Pioneering families such as the Johls anchored an inflow of hundreds of thousands of Punjabi immigrants to California. Over a century, the tide of immigration has introduced the Central Valley to the 15th century Sikh religion. Dozens of Sikh temples, known

as *gurdwaras*, overlook farmers earning a living on farms filled with nut trees and garlanded by grapevines. In 2012, however, California farmers were hit by the most severe drought in the state's history, when much or all of the state faced severe drought conditions for four long years.

Today, a quarter of California's over 200,000 Punjabi Americans work agriculture-related jobs. About 3,000 people with Punjabi origins own farms on about 10% of the state's 9.6 million acres of cropland, according to Sam Vang, a soil conservationist at the United States Department of Agriculture, who has spent 23 years working closely with California's Asian American farmers. Most of them live and work at farms along Highway 99, which connects Yuba-Sutter in the north to Bakersfield in the south.

Three hours down the highway from Johl's peach orchard, in Fresno County, Simranjit Singh Sran tends 100 acres of nuts and grapes under the watchful gaze of his two shepherd dogs — one German, the other Anatolian. Sran's farm in Fresno County — once dubbed the "farming capital of the world" by the mayor of Fresno — is one of about 1,000 Punjabi American-owned farms that produce over half of the county's raisins and almonds. For 15 years, Sran, a 28-year-old Punjabi American, has farmed alongside his father, who worked with his father, who arrived in Fresno in 1991, spent 16-hour days in the field and eventually saved the down payment for the family's

first 20 acres of grapes. From February to October, on busy days, Sran sometimes wakes up at 2 a.m. and dons his beige-colored turban. He submerges himself in the vines and orchards until sunset, watering the plants, harvesting crops with a Massey Ferguson tractor. Sran's family farmed for many generations in Punjab, and in California, they managed to get through the previous drought. "This is a lifestyle," he told me. "This is what we want to do for the rest of our lives."

No one in Sran's family entertained the thought of selling even a small piece of land until late 2020, when they barely broke even for four years in a row. If they had to sell the land they'd cultivated for almost two decades, Sran said, speaking half-heartedly, he would try to become a real estate agent or a mathematics professor. But his "dream job," he told me, had always been inheriting the family business. The wholesale selling price of almonds plunged from \$4 a pound in 2014 to \$1.75 in 2020, however. This winter's meager precipitation, leaving the



Punjabi American farmers prune peach trees in the early morning light on Karm Bain's Yuba City, California, farm (opposite).

Kulwant Singh Johl photographed at Johl Orchards near Marysville, California (top right).

Balbir Singh closes an irrigation gate that connects Karm Baim's Gridley, California, orchard to a Feather River irrigation canal (right).



Sierra Nevada snowpack at half of the historical average last spring, could plunge prices even lower. Sran's farm received less than 40% of its average water allotment from the aqueducts and canals that divert snowmelt for irrigation. He had to pump groundwater to compensate for the deficit and sustain the growth. "Whenever we pump, we definitely see a hole in our pockets," Sran told me. "Two more years like this, and that's it."

The recent storms replenished the Sierra Nevada snowpack and the major reservoirs to above 60% of their historic average. But as California and the Southwest get warmer, the regional climate will become more arid overall. Studies project that even though California could see more precipitation by the end of the century, the associated rise in extreme temperatures and the more

*(continued on page 29)*



The Feather River, shown just below California's Oroville Reservoir, serves as a year-round water supply for Yuba County's farmers (top).

Karm Bains photographed at the Sri Guru Nanak Sikh temple in Yuba City (above).

Harmail Singh waters clonal UCB1 pistachio trees at the Sierra Gold Nurseries in Yuba City, California (right).



# High and dry

Things are bad and getting worse in the Colorado River Basin.

BY NICK BOWLIN

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA** farmers spend their winters watching the snowpack in the Colorado Rockies, and what they see is the climate crisis hitting hard. When it melts, the snow that falls on these peaks will, eventually, make its way into the Colorado River, which connects the Southwest like a great tendon, tying the Continental Divide in Colorado to Southern California's hayfields, where the Imperial Irrigation District is one of the country's largest, and pouring from the faucets of urban users in Los Angeles and San Diego.

From California's perspective,

the view upriver is not encouraging. More than half of the upper part of the river basin is in "exceptional drought," according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, while the Lower Basin is even worse off: More than 60% of it is in the highest drought level. In January, water levels in Lake Powell, the river's second-largest reservoir, dropped to unprecedented depths, triggering a drought contingency plan for the first time for the Upper Basin states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico.

Since 2000, the Colorado River Basin has seen a sustained period of less water and hotter days. This

is, as climate scientists like to say, the "new normal." But within this new normal, there have been exceptional drought years. One of them was 2020. Last year began with an encouraging snowpack in the Colorado Rockies. But a warm spring followed, and, then the seasonal summer monsoons never came to drench the Southwest. The lack of precipitation persisted into the fall and early winter, leaving the basin in a condition dire enough that water policy wonks — not a crowd known for melodrama — have begun using words like "scary" and "terrifying."

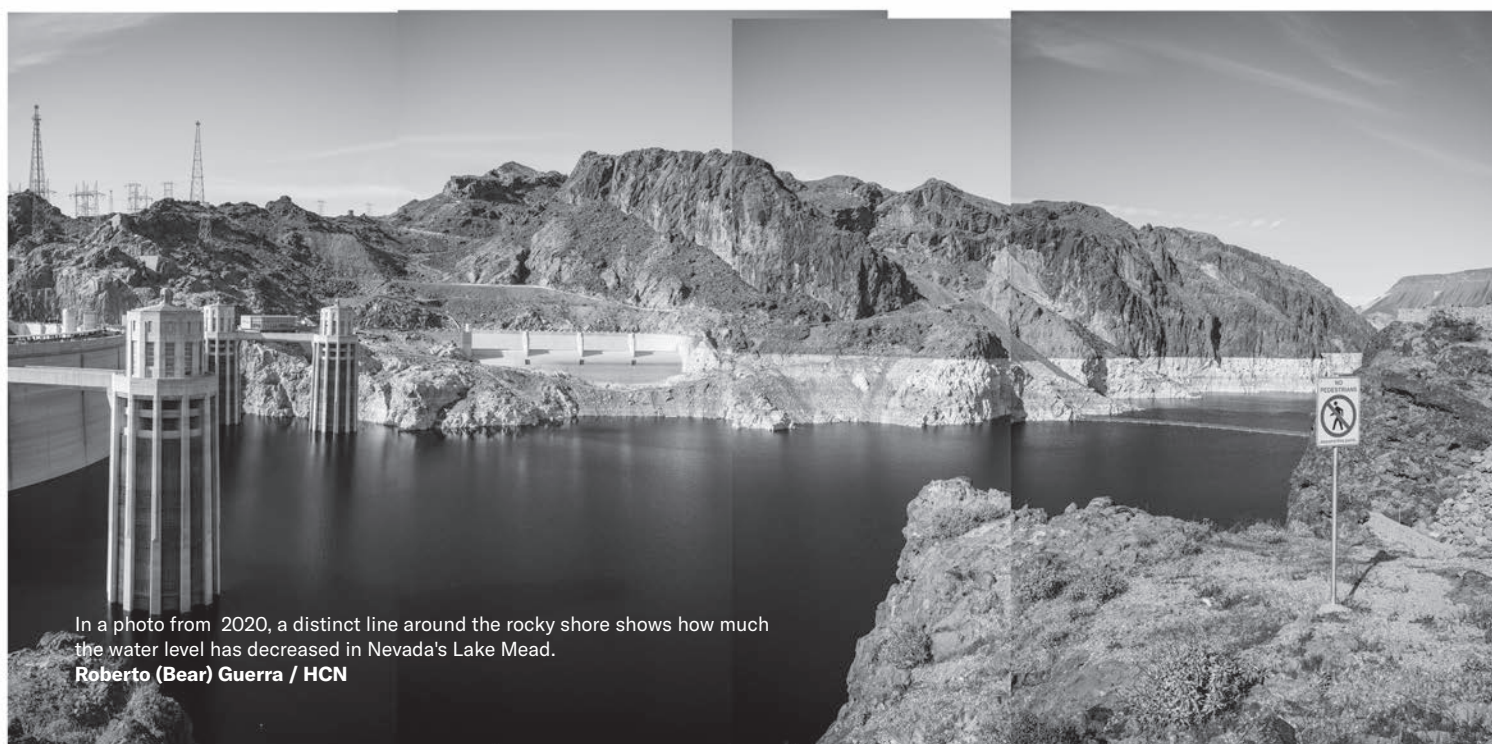
"In the 20th century on the Colorado River, nature was bent to human will," the study stated. "Because we are now fully consuming its waters, and inflows are expected to decline, in the 21st century humans will be forced to bend to the will of nature."

The current version of the Colorado River Compact — the legal agreement that governs the river — expires in 2026. It will be renegotiated over the next several years amid a patchwork of interests, including seven Southwestern

states, myriad agricultural districts, the Mexican government, some of the nation's fastest-growing urban areas, including Las Vegas and Phoenix, and many tribal nations, whose legal claims have historically been discounted. A compendium of policies, historic water rights, court rulings, laws and agreements, the Colorado River Compact allocates water for tens of millions of people and some of the most important agricultural regions in the country. The impending renegotiation will determine how that water is distributed as the demand for water outstrips the river's dwindling flow. Meanwhile, according to numerous models, the impacts of climate change will only intensify. A recent study from the Center for Colorado River Studies predicted that the Lower Basin states of California, Nevada and Arizona could be forced to reduce their take from the river by up to 40% by 2050.

"It's a red alert," said Felicia Marcus, a fellow at Stanford University's Water in the West Program and former chair of the California State Water Resources

*(continued on page 29)*



In a photo from 2020, a distinct line around the rocky shore shows how much the water level has decreased in Nevada's Lake Mead.

Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN

# HCN in the 2010s

## PROTEST AND PROVOCATION

The 2010s were marked by growing tensions across the West, as right-wing organizations rebelled against the person and policies of President Barack Obama, and a diverse coalition of liberal-minded activists came together to fight extractive energy projects, climate change, and racial and economic injustice.

Galvanized by the election of our first African American president and connected by new social media tools, hundreds of right-wing protesters descended on the Nevada ranch of Cliven Bundy in 2014. Bundy had already made a name for himself for refusing to pay over \$1 million in grazing fees for his use of federal lands. Two years later, an armed militia led by Bundy's son, Ammon, seized the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters in eastern Oregon, demanding that public lands managed by the federal government be turned over to the states. That conflict lasted 40 days and resulted in the death of one militia member, numerous arrests, and, alas, very few convictions.

Meanwhile, climate and social justice activists found common ground on the High Plains in October of 2016, when Native American tribes led a protest against the Dakota Access (oil) Pipeline, which threatened water sources and sacred burial sites near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The violent response to the protesters gained extensive media attention, including

incisive, on-the-ground coverage from *High Country News*. It also foreshadowed the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.

## FRACTURE LINES

The 2016 election of President Donald Trump laid bare the deep divides across the country — especially in the West. Within months, the Trump administration began unraveling pretty much every progressive environmental protection put on the books by the Obama administration. In December 2017, a year after Obama collaborated with five tribes to create the 1.3 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah, Trump slashed its size by 85%. He also cut in half the state's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Trump, who used illegal immigration as his campaign's signature issue, diverted funds from other agencies to extend a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. *High Country News* reporters delved deep into the Borderlands, revealing the severed connections between once-united communities, the environmental impacts of wall construction, and the efforts of some locals to stand up against the vigilante groups patrolling the region.

*High Country News* rode the waves of protest against the Trump presidency to new heights in paid circulation and website visitation. In the summer of 2017, we created an Indigenous

Kyle Mateo, Marisa Pelletier and Rick Buckman Coe (from left) pose for a photograph in the Oceti Sakowin camp on the edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in November 2016. **Terray Sylvester**



Affairs Desk overseen by Native American journalists, a first for any non-Native news outlet in the country. In March of 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic swept the nation, *HCN* published a year-long investigation into how expropriated Indigenous lands provided the foundation for the nation's land-grant universities.

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## The mad, fervent and misguided

"It was nerve-racking, following heavily armed men into the middle of nowhere, to a 187,757-acre wildlife refuge 30 miles from the nearest town. I arrived at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge at dusk on Jan. 2, the only reporter present. Four armed men stood

around a sagebrush fire they'd built behind a white truck, which blocked the road to the occupied buildings. They were 'not at liberty to talk to the media,' one said, and they initially refused to be photographed. But when I reminded them that I had a consti-

Brooke Warren photographing for a story at Paonia Reservoir, Colorado, in 2017. **Emily Benson / HCN**

tutional right to take pictures on public land, they agreed."

**—Brooke Warren, HCN production associate, on her unplanned New Year's visit to the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in January 2016.**

"I went to the Malheur looking for kindred spirits. I found the mad, the fervent, the passionately misguided. I found the unknowing pawns of an existential chess game, in which we are, all of us, now caught. Driving home across the snow-packed Malheur Basin, through mile after mile of sage, with towering basalt cliffs in the near distance, herds of mule deer appearing as gray specks in the tongues of slide rock and wind-exposed yellow grass, I did not wonder what Edward Abbey would have said about all of this, or Kropotkin or the lugubrious mon-

archist Hobbes. I thought instead of the old C.S. Lewis books of my childhood, and of Lewis' writings on the nature of evil, where evil is never a lie, because lying implies creation, and evil, by its nature, has no creative power. Instead, the nature of evil is to take a truth and twist it, sometimes as much as 180 degrees. Love of country becomes hatred of those we believe don't share our devotion, or don't share it the same way. The natural right of armed self-defense becomes the means to take over a wildlife refuge, to exert tyranny on those who work there, or those who love the place for the nature it preserves in a world replete with man's endeavors. The Constitution, one of the most liberal and empowering documents ever composed, becomes, with just a slight annotation or interpretation, the tool of our own enslavement."

**—Hal Herring, from his essay, "The Darkness at the Heart of Malheur," in the March 21, 2016, print edition**

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## HCN COMMUNITY

# Our expanding universe

**IN JANUARY, READERS** across the world devoured *High Country News* stories about the costs of building the border wall, the conflict between small-town residents and wealthy second-home owners in a Western resort area, and the gun-toting, transgender alpaca ranchers who are toppling stereotypes in rural Colorado. The appetite was so great, in fact, that we hit our second-best month of all time on hcn.org, with more than 536,000 visitors. Not too bad, considering that our record had just been set last November, with 597,000!

The expansion of our audience is one of the top goals of our 50th Anniversary Campaign. Now, thanks to the generosity of our readers, we are making the investments needed to keep us on an upward trajectory. It starts with people: In February, we hired Michael Schrantz as marketing and communications manager. He joins Director of Product and Marketing Gary Love, who signed on in September, and Laura Dixon, our events and business partner coordinator. It's the first true marketing team *HCN* has ever had.

The next step is technological. With additional campaign donations, we hope to revamp our website, moving it to a more flexible and customer-friendly content management system. If you read only the print version, you're missing out: hcn.org delivers not only all of our print content, but also quick analyses of current events and stories from our stellar media partners. Signing up to receive our newsletters is a great first step toward accessing everything we do.

Of course, the print magazine remains a primary tool for outreach. Thanks to a flurry of

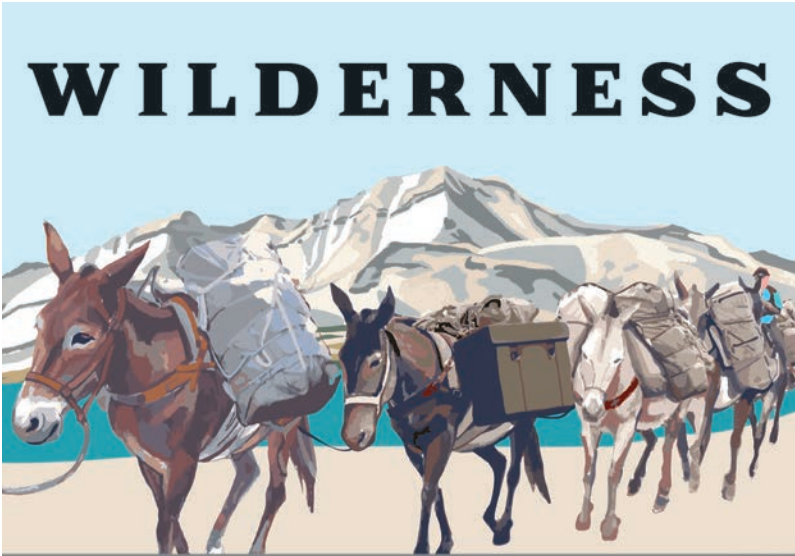
reader donations in early February, we are now sending copies to Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Interior Secretary nominee Deb Haaland and every single member of Congress.

The online universe is clearly the place where we'll find many of our future readers. Still, we can't wait to return to the kind of in-person gatherings that brought staff and readers together for decades. Stay tuned for details about future get-togethers, both on Zoom and in the flesh.

We are excited to announce that Brandon Yadegari Moreno has been chosen as our first climate justice fellow, a new position made possible with support from the Society for Environmental Journalists. Brandon is a producer and cinematographer based in the San Francisco Bay Area, on Lisjan (Ohlone) lands that were never ceded. He reports in both English and Spanish, focusing on displacement, migration, queerness, and land use in the American West and Latin America. The son of immigrants, Brandon was raised in Tucson, Arizona, and holds a master's degree in video journalism from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. You can check out his work at brandonyadegari.com. —Paul Larmer



Brandon Yadegari Moreno, our first climate justice fellow. **Dallin Mello**



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(continued from page 20)

extended, greater precipitation fluctuations are likely to increase the need for water on irrigated farmland. More intense, longer and deeper droughts will become the norm. This year, close to 60% of California and over 95% of the Southwest, according to the USDA, is in severe drought. Many farmers are fallowing land and reducing planting, just as they did in 2012. And smaller growers — people who farm less than 300 acres — will be hit the hardest in the coming months. New wells dipping deeper into the earth are expensive. “They don’t have at least \$40,000 to drill a new (well). What can you do? You are forced to sell your property. Otherwise, you lose everything,” said Vang, with the USDA. “Every time I talk to them, I feel the pain.”

For more than two decades, Vang has encouraged smaller-scale Asian American farmers in the area to form guilds to bargain with farm-product suppliers and empower future farmers to participate in the policymaking process in California, which has historically neglected minority farmers. “If you don’t

see it or you don’t feel it, then you need to open your eyes. There’s always prejudice. There’s always discrimination,” said Kashmir Gill, former mayor of Yuba City and the first Sikh mayor elected in the United States. “You learn to live with it. You learn to deal with it. You can’t sit there and cry about it. ... That doesn’t get you anywhere.”

**LAST SEPTEMBER**, when end-of-year production and profits were set to plummet, dozens of farmers with Punjabi origin gathered virtually and established the Punjabi American Growers’ Group. The group, formed in May 2020, has heard from over 50 Punjabi American farmers who are concerned about selling their land and having to quit. Some are considering trying to recoup their production in the wetter Yuba City, where descendants of the earliest Punjabi immigrants serve in local government.

“Everybody in this community, up and down the state, has a tie to Yuba City. This is a ‘Little Punjab,’ ” said Karmdeep Singh Bains, a fourth-generation farmer who is Sutter County’s new unaffiliated board supervisor. On a sunny



Farmers Surinder Pal, Vir Singh and Joga Singh Sahota (from left) rake brush on Karm Bain’s Gridley, California, farm.

winter day, the gold-gilded dome of a gurdwara flickered in front of the distant snowcapped Sierra Nevadas, rising over his family’s sprawling orchards.

Recently during a phone interview, he became solemn as he spoke of depleted aquifers and empty dams even after

rainfall. “It’s getting harder and harder. It’s not the same agriculture that my dad, my grandfather and my great-grandfather were doing,” Bains said. “But no matter (whether) it’s Punjab or California or anywhere, Punjabis will never quit farming. It’s in our DNA.” ☀

(continued from page 21)

Control Board. “Everyone knows the red alert is ringing, and we’ve known this is coming for a long time.”

**OF ALL THE** various metrics available to measure this challenge, storage capacity at the Colorado River’s important reservoirs is one of the most useful. In January, a study by the Bureau of Reclamation estimated that Lake Powell could dip below a crisis threshold by 2022.

This forecast is not the most likely one, but the study triggers a drought-planning process — an acknowledgement that the worst-case scenario could come to pass for one of the country’s most important water storage sites. In 2019, Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the U.S., hit its own version of this

threshold, which led Arizona, Nevada and Mexico to voluntarily limit their Colorado River water use for the first time ever. Put together, both Mead and Powell are on track to reach their lowest recorded levels ever in 2021, KUNC reported. Water levels in Mead and Powell languish at about 40% capacity, according to the most recent figures.

This future complicates the amalgamation of treaties, policies, laws at various levels of government, court decisions and agreements that make up the governance of the river, stretching all the way back to the 1922 Colorado River Compact, the original interstate agreement. To give just one example, the Upper Basin states have long planned increased water use — water that the over-allocated basin can’t

afford — thereby increasing the likelihood, according to the study, of a situation where the Lower Basin states would not receive their fair share of water. The result would be a “call” on the river, with the Lower Basin states demanding more water and legally mandated cutbacks for more junior water users higher on the river, including the city of Denver. The ensuing legal fights would be ugly.

This grim future hangs over the next several years, as both the Upper and Lower Basin states renegotiate the Colorado River Compact and work to reduce the water they use and keep crucial reservoirs filled. But these negotiations are difficult and political, with self-interest competing against the need to do right by the basin as a

whole. Meanwhile, sensing profit in scarcity, Wall Street and hedge funds are pushing to privatize Colorado River water and allow markets to trade the resource as a commodity, according to a recent *New York Times* investigation.

The problem with vast water negotiations like the Colorado River Compact, said Marcus, the Stanford water policy expert, is that every entity, from governments down to people watering their lawns, come to expect the current amount of available water — even if that availability is an outlier or set to change. “Farmers can’t expect that they can plant whatever they want or not expect water to be expensive,” she said. “Urban areas need to get way more efficient, people need to ditch way more lawns.” ☀

# DID JAMES PLYMELL NEED TO DIE?

## THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE SEMI-URBAN WEST.

By Leah Sottile



James Plymell lies dead on a residential street in Albany, Oregon, after being repeatedly tased by police officers. Plymell thought he had run out of gas, and his car was parked in the bike lane. **Albany Police Department via public records requests**

*Plymell's  
crimes  
involved  
sleeping in  
public parks,  
littering,  
drinking  
in public  
or being  
intoxicated.*

#### **A COUPLE OF STRAY DOGS**

were running loose in the parking lot of the Linn County fairgrounds just after 8 a.m. on Oct. 23, 2019, and Gerry Morris, a community service officer (CSO) with the Albany Police Department in Oregon, was on his way to help round them up. Morris turned onto a street that snakes past the blank-looking backs of stores and homes wedged next to railroad tracks. He noticed a beat-up silver Nissan Sentra stranded in the bike lane, partially blocking the road. A man with salt-and-pepper hair, who was wearing baggy gray sweatpants and a sleeveless blue shirt, was struggling to push it out of the way, but he didn't appear to be making much progress. The dogs could wait.

Morris pulled over and got out.

As a CSO, he is one of four unarmed officers employed by the small police department in Oregon's Willamette Valley. As he described it, CSOs are tasked with handling "livability-type issues": abandoned vehicles, municipal code violations, fender benders. "I don't even carry handcuffs," Morris would tell a detective from the Oregon State Police six days later. And, unlike the department's armed officers, CSOs don't wear body cameras.

By the fall of 2019, Morris had been working in law enforcement in the Willamette Valley for nearly 40 years, first with the Eugene Police and then for 17 years as an armed officer for Albany PD. He'd been a CSO in Albany for the past 16. He received all of his police training in the Willamette Valley, and evidence of his long career there is scattered across local news: In 1994, his promotion to the narcotics

team made the paper; in 2006, as a CSO, Morris appeared on the front page after he tased an aggressive pit bull. Later, in one August 2010 photo, Morris is shown flipping burgers at a community barbecue. On the Albany Police Department's Facebook page are photos of him snuggling rescued puppies and baby goats.

"Can I help you push it off the road?" Morris asked the man.

"I ran out of gas," the man responded. But they might have trouble, he added: He had a back injury. Morris said they could still give it a try.

Morris, who later told the Oregon State Police detective that he didn't recognize the man, had in fact encountered him at least four times before. His name was James Plymell III.

Plymell initially said that he didn't have the car keys, but then, moments later, he patted his pockets and found them. Morris thought that was odd. He looked into the car and saw boxes piled high with clothing and belongings in the front seat, suggesting that Plymell was living in it. And Plymell seemed nervous. "His verbiage — it wasn't making sense," Morris told the state police. "I could see the front of his pants were wet. Getting closer to him, you could smell a sweet odor of ... something."

Morris later told the detective that once he saw Plymell's wet pants, he decided to call for backup. "Station one, code two," Morris radioed in, a non-emergency request for assistance.

This seemed to make Plymell even more anxious — "amped up," Morris said. Plymell rifled through the boxes in the passenger seat;

Morris, worried that he was looking for a weapon, told Plymell to keep his hands where he could see them.

"Step it up," Morris said into his radio.

In Albany, a town of 53,000 people, local police knew Plymell well: who he was, who he wasn't, and how he acted around law enforcement. Between 2012 and 2019, the department ticketed, cited or arrested him about once per month on average. *High Country News* reviewed a list of 103 incidents during that time and found no mention of weapons, no record of violence. Plymell's crimes involved sleeping in public parks, littering, drinking in public or being intoxicated — the kind of infractions that housing advocates and legal experts say cities and towns use to criminalize homelessness, poverty, addiction and the behavior of people with mental health issues.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic crippled the U.S. economy and forced an estimated 30 million people to face potential eviction, homelessness was on the rise. In 2019, an estimated 568,000 people in the U.S. experienced homelessness. And the issue is particularly severe on the West Coast: In California, Oregon and Washington, in 2019, 29 to 38 people per 10,000 were homeless; those three states, along with the District of Columbia, New York and Hawaii, had the highest rates of homelessness nationwide. (Alaska, Nevada and Colorado had only slightly lower rates.) "There is not one city in the entire United States where there is enough shelter for people that are homeless," Donald Whitehead, executive director of the

National Coalition for the Homeless, said. “That’s rural, that’s urban, that’s suburban. That’s across the board. ... This isn’t just a big-city problem.”

It’s a problem in Albany, too — and, in this case, it would contribute to James Plymell’s death, lying on the pavement on a cut-through street, next to a bright yellow-painted Battery X-Change store, across from a line of old houses, near a PetCo, and a Goodwill, and a strip mall. A place between places.

**OFFICER EMILY SCHROFF** heard CSO Morris’ second call when she was parked in a nearby parking lot, drinking coffee and eating breakfast in her black police SUV. She flipped on her sirens and sped toward the scene.

Like Morris, Schroff, now 27, received all of her police training in the Willamette Valley. By October 2019, she was in her fourth year with Albany PD, where she’s also a member of the SWAT negotiation team.

Schroff arrived — body camera recording — and saw Morris standing at the open driver’s side door

of the Nissan. Plymell was in the driver’s seat. As she approached, Schroff pulled purple plastic gloves over her hands, stretching them up over the outline of the state of Texas tattooed on her inner left wrist.

“Out of the car, please,” Morris commanded.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Plymell replied casually, maybe even a little annoyed. “I’m out of gas.”

“Out of the car, please,” Morris repeated.

“You need to get out of the car,” Schroff interjected, lowering her voice. “Do it now.” Schroff, too, had come across Plymell at least three times before.

“I’m a licensed driver,” Plymell told her, still seated. Morris looked at Schroff, who started pulling Plymell by the arm.

“Am I under arrest?” he asked. Yes, Schroff said, for failing to obey a lawful order, and interfering with an officer. They struggled for a few seconds.

“You’re gonna get tased if you don’t get out of the car,” Schroff warned as she tugged at Plymell’s arm. She drew her Taser — a black device, shaped like a gun — and

removed its barbs, preparing it for “drive-stun” mode, in which the device is pressed directly against the body for “pain compliance,” the use of painful stimulus to control an uncooperative person. Plymell yelled “OK! OK! OK! I’ll get out! I’ll get out!” He put his left foot on the ground just as Schroff pushed the Taser toward him. He flailed his arms, batting the device away.

At the moment Schroff’s Taser began to click, she had been at the scene for 42 seconds.

“HELP! Help! HELP!” Plymell yelled. “I didn’t do anything! I just ran out of gas!”

Morris yelled into his radio that officers were now fighting with the subject.

Other officers began to arrive, including Gina Bell, a former gym manager in her late 20s who had been on the force for only a year. Bell, who had never encountered Plymell before, ran toward the Nissan, where Schroff and Morris were grappling with Plymell. “Get out of the car right now or you’re going to be tased!” she screamed.

“Tase him!” Schroff commanded, and Bell did not hesitate. The wires of her Taser launched with a loud

pop, and Plymell’s yells transformed into high-pitched screaming. The officers dragged him from the car.

“Do it again,” Schroff said. Bell’s Taser continued clicking as Plymell writhed on the ground. He twisted and kicked. As the officers piled on top of him, his torso was thrust underneath the Nissan. His sweat-pants started to fall down.

“I swear to God!” Plymell said as Bell tased him. “They’re gonna blow me up!” He screamed for help. “You already beat me once!”

He yelled something, too, about how he didn’t “see those little girls” — a discordant note that records and post-incident interviews never explained. Another officer arrived. “Tase him again?” the new officer asked the police piled on the ground. “No!” Morris shouted. “Don’t tase him again, that’s gonna get one of us.”

As Plymell continued to yell for help, the officers struggled to get his right arm out from underneath his body.

“Help!” Plymell cried into the pavement. “Help. Help. Help. Hey. Help. Help. They’ll kill me. Help. Hel— He— He—”

He went limp and silent. “Are you awake?” Bell yelled, slapping the man’s back. “He’s unresponsive.”

“He’s still breathing, though,” Schroff said.

The officers pulled Plymell out from underneath the car and snapped his wrists into cuffs, propping him up into a seated position.

“Is this Plymell?” Schroff asked. “Is this James Plymell?”

“Sir?” Bell called, looking at Plymell’s face. “Do we need to do CPR? What the fuck? He’s blue, you



*“HELP! Help!  
HELP! I  
didn’t do  
anything! I  
just ran out  
of gas!”*



Screen shots from footage captured by Officer Emily Schroff’s body camera as she responded to the radio call from Community Service Officer Gerry Morris for non-emergency assistance. Schroff arrived, then pulled James Plymell out of his vehicle. **Albany Police Department via public records requests**

guys — put him down!”

The struggle had lasted just over four minutes; a swarm of officers new to the scene now gathered, performing CPR until local medics arrived. They worked on Plymell for 20 minutes. But the man — who minutes before had been simply a person stranded on the side of the road — was pronounced dead at 8:51 a.m.

As Schroff stood by watching, another officer approached her. “Was he under the influence of meth?” he asked. She wasn’t sure, she said — maybe alcohol? She was breathing hard, winded from performing chest compressions on Plymell. “In all past incidents where we’ve had to fight him, he’s under the influence of meth at the time,” the officer told her before looking down at her body camera. “Are you recording?” he asked. She said yes. The officer walked away.

“I wouldn’t say anything further,” said another officer standing nearby.

“OK,” she said.

Yet another officer drew Bell and Schroff aside. “You’re not in trouble,” he explained, although an investigation into the incident

would occur. He gave them two thumbs up. “Sounds like you guys did great,” he reassured them. “OK? Things like this happen.”

**JAMES FULLER PLYMELL III** was a son of the Willamette Valley, the wide green land between the Oregon Coast Range and the Cascade Mountains, home to Oregon’s prized hazelnuts and luscious pinot noir grapes. Plymell had lived in Lebanon and Albany and Eugene and all the spaces between those towns for nearly his entire life. Three generations of Plymells have called this part of Oregon home; his grandfather was a city councilman in Waterloo, and a member of the council’s police committee in 1951.

The area was already — and is still — home to the Kalapuya, Molalla and Chinook peoples when, in the 19th century, white settlers followed the Oregon Trail to the Willamette Valley. The settlers built ferries that shuttled passengers up the Willamette River. At a bend in the river, they constructed a bustling downtown filled with ornate French and Italianate architecture, much of it still standing in Albany today.

Before statehood in 1859, back when Oregon Territory was known as a bastion of Confederate supporters, the Legislature combined Albany — a pro-Union town — with the town of Takenah, which was dominated by Southern sympathizers.

For a long time, Albany, like most places in the state, was powered by timber money and industrial labor. Until a decade ago, travelers driving up or down Interstate Five would know they’d arrived when the acrid reek of the International Paper mill wafted through their open windows. The mill — which was actually located in Millersburg, not Albany — closed in 2009, and was demolished in 2012. “How will I know where to find Albany now?” one reader mused on the local newspaper’s Facebook page.

Plymell’s first name was James,

*“Nobody’s perfect, you know? He had a problem with alcohol. I’m not gonna lie or beat around the bush. It didn’t define who he was.”*

but some family and old friends called him Jeff, his childhood best friend, Don Ackroyd, said. “He was one of those hardcore friends that’s hard to find.”

Plymell briefly moved away, then returned to the Valley as a young teenager. Unlike Ackroyd and his other friends, he didn’t graduate from high school. He “probably didn’t hang around the true role model adults,” Ackroyd said. (HCN could not locate any immediate family members for this story.)

Court records show that Plymell’s troubles with the law started early. When he was 13, he was caught driving without a license. At 16, he was caught driving without insurance; at 18, with an ounce of marijuana.

He tried methamphetamine. At some point, Plymell was diagnosed with schizophrenia. And yet, Ackroyd said, time and time again he saw his friend beat back his addictions, cycling in and out of sober housing in Albany, attending recovery meetings, trying to clean up his life.

“Nobody’s perfect, you know?” Ackroyd said. “He had a problem with alcohol. I’m not gonna lie or beat around the bush. It didn’t define who he was.” More than once, drinking and drugs landed Plymell in the hospital; the doctors would call Ackroyd to ask if Plymell had any allergies. It was a heart-breaking cycle. “You could trust him with anything,” Ackroyd said. “He wouldn’t steal from you or rob you. But God, the drinking. When he was drinking, he was just really difficult. He would argue, or just rattle on about crazy things.”

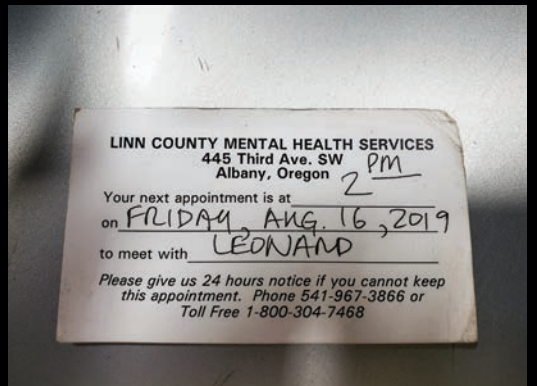
At times, he held down stable work. Plymell was good with cars, “a Dodge guy,” who worked in auto body shops around the Valley. Some years, he took seasonal work stacking hay bales at local farms, a job he loved.

Plymell was living in a group home when he met Querina Landauer in a recovery group. The two got married in 2006, when Plymell was 32. But when he



James Plymell's body lies on the pavement. “Sounds like you guys did great,” an officer told responding officers Bell and Schroff. “OK? Things like this happen.”

**Albany Police Department via public records requests**



Photos from the scene and from the search of James Plymell's car, following his death. Lower right: One of the expended Taser cartridges recovered from the scene. Plymell was repeatedly tased by Albany Police officers before his death. **Albany Police Department via public records requests**

relapsed, “he started really getting verbally abusive to me,” Landauer said. “He was conniving. He was a narcissist.” He never hit her — “I wouldn’t put up with that shit,” she said — but he was impossible to live with, and the two divorced in 2010.

His encounters with local police continued throughout their marriage, and Plymell became convinced that the cops were out to get him. One late night in June 2004, shortly before he met Landauer, Plymell stood in the road near the Highway 20 overpass of Interstate 5, shirtless and yelling at cars. Police said he was screaming that he wanted to talk to Jesus. An officer, suspecting that he was on drugs, ordered him to get out of the road. He didn’t.

Albany Police fired beanbag rounds — fabric pouches filled with either lead shot or sand that can fracture skulls and break blood vessels in the brain — from a shotgun to get Plymell to comply. When the first shot didn’t work, the offi-

cers fired more than a dozen more, tearing through Plymell’s skin.

It was useless — the beanbags “only enraged him,” read one local news report. Albany PD then tried pepper spray, with little result. “Officers considered calling for the Albany Fire Department to bring a firehose to spray him with,” the paper wrote. In the end, they wrestled him to the ground, handcuffed him, charged him with menacing, resisting arrest and disorderly conduct, and transported him to a local hospital, where his injuries were treated.

Landauer said that when she and Plymell first met, he had scars all over his body. After police beanbagged him, he became even angrier and more afraid of law enforcement. “He hated the police,” she said. “Hated them. They wouldn’t ever listen to him.”

According to Albany PD, the incident happened so long ago that the records of it have been destroyed.

**THE OREGON STATE POLICE** opened an investigation into Plymell’s death on the day it occurred — the standard response when someone dies after the police have used force in a small department like Albany’s. Morris, Bell, Schroff and the fourth officer to pile on Plymell were put on administrative leave while the investigation progressed. The state police detectives interviewed witnesses and the officers involved, searched Plymell’s car and phone, and spoke to people who knew him.

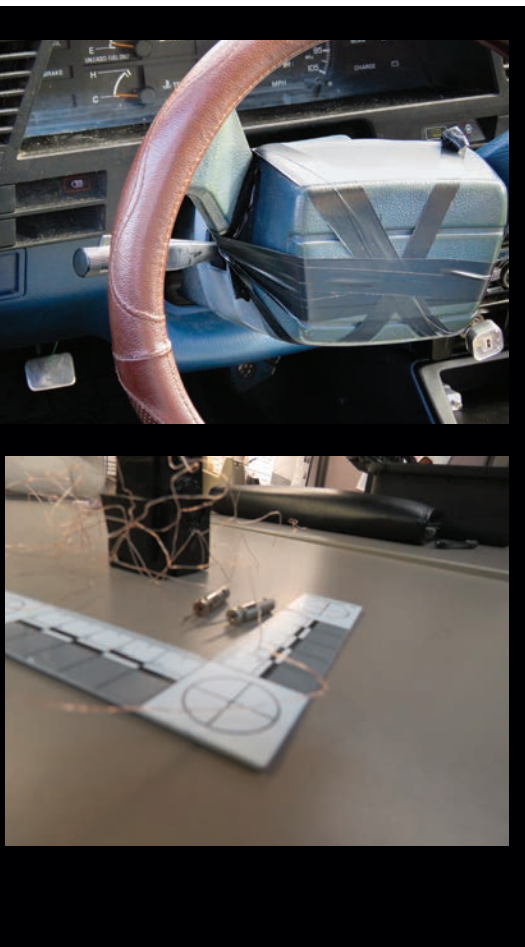
Detectives asked if the officers recognized Plymell. Morris said no. Schroff said no, too, but then explained that she knew who he was. She described the scene. “I remember seeing a partially crushed silver beer can behind the driver’s seat,” she said. “That added to my suspicion of DUI and him being under the influence of something. As I got closer, I could smell urine, that he’d soiled himself. I was familiar with that, because when I’d

contacted him in the past, that had been the case as well.

“I didn’t know if there were weapons in there,” Schroff continued. “I knew there was some reason Officer Morris was asking him to get out of the vehicle.” At one point, she started to cry. “I didn’t want him to die.”

In 2017, Plymell was a passenger in a car accident in a small town outside Albany. “He was lucky to be alive,” his friend Ackroyd said. His hips and back were seriously injured, though, and he was prescribed Oxycontin for the pain. Lori Ann Bourgeois, who dated Plymell during the final month of his life, told the police that he would sell it, or use it quickly.

He was in a wheelchair for a time after the accident. But even when he was able to walk again, he wasn’t the same. “He had a hard time getting in and out of cars,” Ackroyd told me. “It wasn’t like he couldn’t, but it took him a little time. He had to be real gentle,



too, and when she came home one day from her job as a server at a breakfast joint and caught him drinking and taking pills, she was done. “I don’t know what made him drink that night I ended up kicking him out,” she said. “I told him nothing was going to come between me and my drug program.” During the week before he died, Plymell lived in his broken-down car in the parking lot of her apartment building. Bourgeois told me that she still didn’t really understand what happened. She hadn’t seen the body camera footage of Plymell’s death; she’d heard rumors, and she had questions. “The whole police department knew him and his situation,” she said. “They should have known he could barely freaking move.”

OSP finished its investigation the following month, and the case was referred to the Linn County District Attorney’s Office. In December 2019, County District Attorney Doug Marteeny issued a statement concluding that Plymell’s death was not caused, in any part, by the at least four 50,000-volt tasings that he received from Albany Police officers. Instead, the local paper reported, Plymell “died from cardiac complications of acute methamphetamine toxicity.”

“The case is now closed and you should feel free to bring your officers back for full-time duties as you deem appropriate,” Marteeny told the Albany PD. (The department declined to make Schroff, Morris and Bell available for comment. Requests for comment from attorneys representing them went unanswered.)

When Plymell’s car was hauled away and combed for evidence, detectives found two white pills, neither of which could be identified, in a locked box in the trunk. There were pillows and blankets in the car. There was an appointment card for mental health services. There was no drug paraphernalia, no bottles or cans of alcohol.

Behind the driver’s seat, they found an empty can of Monster Energy Drink.

because his back was really messed up — his spine and back.”

Officer Schroff, however, thought Plymell used a wheelchair simply because he was too drunk to walk. “He is not wheelchair-bound,” she told OSP investigators. “That was something that I think he utilized to get around with his intoxication level.”

“Ah,” one detective responded.

Bourgeois told me that the crash had another result, too, which became a focal point of Plymell’s life. “After the accident, he had incontinence issues,” she said. “It was hard for him to find a place where he could live where he wouldn’t be ridiculed.”

“On our first date, we went to Belknap Hot Springs,” Bourgeois said. “We spent the day up there. He had a hard time walking, and the incontinence thing — that made life a living hell for him.”

Plymell briefly lived with Bourgeois in her apartment in Eugene. She’s a recovering addict,

**PLYMELL PERIODICALLY SOUGHT** help for addiction. One place he went was housed in a converted old church in downtown Albany called CHANCE — Communities Helping Addicts Negotiate Change Effectively. “Everyone here at CHANCE is someone in recovery who deals with addiction,” Executive Director Jeff Blackford told me in December. James “was very open with his struggles around it. ... He was just a good, genuine person. But when he struggled, he struggled.”

Albany has 18 private transitional living homes for people in recovery, and just two shelters to serve its large homeless population. Blackford says that’s not enough. “There needs to be affordable housing, where people that are making the \$741 on (Supplemental Security Income) can afford a rental in Albany,” he said. “It’s just not affordable. You can’t find an apartment for under \$1,000.”

Whitehead, the director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, said skyrocketing housing prices are precisely why the Western U.S. is seeing such a surge of unhoused people. “And then there’s also the jobs that don’t pay a living wage,” he said. “There is no lack of housing when it comes to people at the top of the economic ladder.”

It isn’t just the income disparity; Whitehead and other experts interviewed for this story pointed to the federal government’s actions during the 1980s, such as President Ronald Reagan’s decision to cut

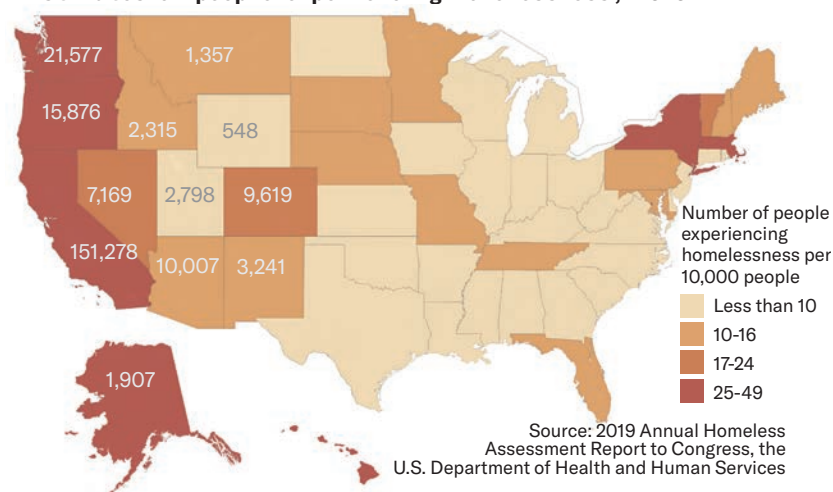
housing subsidies. “It’s an American priority crisis,” Whitehead told me. “It is unfathomable that in the richest country in the history of the world we have people living on the streets. And I think part of that is because several decades ago ... America stopped providing long-term solutions for the homeless. Homeless people and people at the bottom of the economic ladder were villainized.”

As tent encampments have emerged in both cities and towns across the region, misperceptions regarding who is homeless, and why, have also increased. Whitehead estimates that 35% to 40% of unhoused people have full-time jobs or are seniors who are unable to work any longer. “They just can’t afford a place to live,” he said.

Some, like Plymell, are “hard to house” individuals who have criminal records or bad credit history. Many need mental health services, substance abuse programs or rental assistance, but in Albany, connecting people with those services can be a challenge. Most of the organizations that offer those services, including CHANCE, are located in the city’s downtown core, where craft breweries, boutiques and a wine bar are now interspersed among the city’s historic buildings.

In 2018, the Albany City Council, in a 5-1 vote, passed a city code creating an “Enhanced Law Enforcement Area.” People in town call it the “exclusion zone.” The change allowed the city to enact something

**Estimates of people experiencing homelessness, 2019**



of a three-strikes-you're-out policy: Anyone who has been convicted of three offenses — felonies, misdemeanors or city code violations — could be banned from the downtown area for up to a year.

Later that year, Albany was forced to remove illegal camping from the list of offenses that could accrue three strikes after the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Boise, Idaho, had violated people's constitutional rights by citing them for sleeping on public property when they had nowhere else to go. "The government cannot criminalize indigent, homeless people for sleeping outdoors, on public property, on the false premise they had a choice in the matter," the panel of judges wrote. The ruling affects how municipalities treat unhoused people across the Western states — from Montana to California, Arizona to Oregon. Late last year, for example, in Grants Pass, Oregon, a judge ruled that the small city had violated the decision by continuing to ticket and fine people who are unhoused. Experts say that policies like Albany's are more common than not across the state, and that the cost of jailing someone over and over is "probably

more than it costs to put someone in a housing unit," Whitehead said.

Captain Brad Liles, of the Albany PD, pushed back against the idea that the Enhanced Law Enforcement Area was designed to criminalize unhoused people, or keep them from accessing the help they needed. "There wasn't a violation to go to get your services," he said. "But there was to hang out on the corner and drink another beer."

**IN RECENT YEARS,** Albany PD crossed paths with Plymell frequently — sometimes several times a week, sometimes several times in a single day. The department reported him for "transient complaints," disorderly conduct, being intoxicated, camping in prohibited places.

Liles said that while the department saw Plymell often, "he's nowhere near the highest," he said. "I've had some in the 300 to 400 category."

The fall of 2018 is a good example. On Sept. 2, shortly after noon, Plymell was riding his bike shirtless near a drive-thru taco place, where the smell of carne asada blends with the exhaust from four busy lanes of traffic. Officer Emily Schroff

spotted him and recognized him from previous interactions. She ran his name, saw he had 10 warrants, circled the block and stopped him. "(He) became very anxious and fidgety," Schroff's report of the incident reads. "He was yelling that he wasn't drunk." She searched him for weapons — he was unarmed — and took him to Linn County jail.

The next day, the police ran into Plymell twice in the Enhanced Law Enforcement Area: first, when he was sitting shirtless on a local trail he had been prohibited from visiting for six months. An officer cited him, and banned him from it for two more years. Later that night, Plymell was sitting on a sidewalk with a friend who had an open can of Four Loko. His friend was cited. Three days later, both were cited — this time by Schroff.

The pattern continued: An officer would see Plymell, who had warrants, and cite him again or take him to jail. It was a dance that both parties seemed well-acquainted with. On one occasion, the officer citing him noted that "Plymell was decent and cooperative."

One Sunday morning, CSO Morris spotted Plymell "wrapped in sections of carpeting" and sleep-

ing on a park bench downtown; he woke him and cited him for prohibited camping. The next week, Morris roused him from the same bench. "Plymell had wet himself," he wrote in his report. He cited him, again, and banned him for life from the property. Later, he noticed Plymell's bedding had been "folded and left on the ground between a bench and a table." He cited him for littering.

A few days later, Plymell got another citation from Morris for sleeping on the same downtown bench. The next morning, another officer cited him as he rode his bicycle. Later that night, he flagged down an officer as he was walking down the sidewalk. "He was very intoxicated, and it appeared he had urinated and defecated himself," the officer wrote in a report. "James was very upset and stated he was going to kill himself and that he wanted to hurt other people." Plymell told the officer if he didn't help him, he'd jump off a nearby bridge. The officer transported him to the local hospital, helped him to a room and into a bed, and he calmed down.

Two days later, he was back in handcuffs for outstanding warrants, and, yet again, was transported to the Linn County Jail.

In 2017, the Western Regional Advocacy Project, an organization dedicated to ending homelessness, joined the ACLU to push for the introduction of a "Right to Rest" bill in Oregon, after surveying nearly 600 unhoused people in Oregon about their frequent police citations and tickets. But the bill couldn't get a hearing. "The rate of interactions between cops and homeless people is fucking astronomical," Paul Boden, WRAP's director, said. "Sleeping, sitting and standing still, by massive percentages, were the top three criminal offenses people are being hit with. Sleeping, sitting and standing still — who doesn't do that?"

Boden said frequent interactions with police, of the kind that Plymell experienced, are typical — and he doesn't think unarmed community service officers are helping. "Whether they're unarmed

**103 ENCOUNTERS: EXCERPTS FROM AN ALBANY PD REPORT LISTING JAMES PLYMELL'S OFFICER CONTACTS, 2012-2019** CSO Morris responding    Officer Schroff responding

|            |                                  |                 |            |                                |                  |
|------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| 10/23/2019 | 1908833, AOA-Other               | Victim          | 7/31/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)       | Offender         |
| 12/16/2018 | Harassment physical contact/SIM  | Victim          | 7/19/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)       | Offender         |
| 11/05/2018 | Property, Found                  | Registered/Lega | 7/12/2018  | Albany-liquor in posted area   | Offender         |
| 9/27/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 7/11/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)       | Offender         |
| 9/25/2018  | Mental subject - no or volunt p  | Offender        | 6/27/2018  | Criminal trespass 2            | Offender         |
| 9/25/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 6/25/2018  | Albany-prohibited camping      | Offender         |
| 9/24/2018  | Albany-prohibited camping        | Offender        | ...        |                                |                  |
| 9/24/2018  | Littering                        | Offender        | 12/21/2017 | Property, found                | Reporting Person |
| 9/22/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 11/11/2017 | Animal abandonment - other     | Suspect          |
| 9/16/2018  | Albany-prohibited camping        | Offender        | 11/3/2017  | Criminal trespass 2            | Offender         |
| 9/14/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 10/29/2017 | Albany-drinking in public-city | Offender         |
| 9/7/2018   | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 10/28/2017 | Disorderly conduct 2           | Offender         |
| 9/6/2018   | Albany-Drinking in public - city | Offender        | ...        |                                |                  |
| 9/3/2018   | Albany-Consume or possess alcoh  | Offender        | 5/22/2013  | Transient complaint            | Involved other   |
| 9/3/2018   | Criminal trespass 2              | Offender        | 5/3/2013   | Disorderly conduct 1           | Offender         |
| 9/2/2018   | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 4/25/2013  | Disorderly conduct 1           | Involved other   |
| 8/30/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 4/24/2013  | Disturbance - non criminal     | Involved other   |
| 8/29/2018  | Albany-overnight camping         | Offender        | 3/18/2013  | Disorderly conduct 1           | Involved other   |
| 8/23/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Involved other  | 3/15/2013  | Disorderly conduct 1           | Offender         |
| 8/22/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 3/13/2013  | Disturbance - non criminal     | Offender         |
| 8/20/2018  | Criminal trespass 2              | Offender        | 3/11/2013  | Suspicious subject(s)          | Offender         |
| 8/16/2018  | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Involved other  | ...        |                                |                  |
| 8/12/2018  | Albany-prohibited camping        | Offender        | 5/14/2012  | Transient complaint            | Involved other   |
| 8/4/2018   | Theft 3 - services               | Offender        | 5/4/2012   | Theft 1, Other                 | Offender         |
| 8/2/2018   | Warrant arrest (LW only)         | Offender        | 1/1/2012   | Assault 3, Simple assault      | Witness          |

SOURCE: Albany Police Department via public records requests

so they're more palatable to the general public, or whether they're fully armed, they're still enforcement," Boden says. "Their job is to enforce these laws that were put on the books in order to mitigate the impact of your presence in your community. 'I'm watching you, I'm following you, I'm hunting you down, motherfucker. And as soon as you step out of line, I'm going to jack you up.'"

Capt. Liles said that the department has a single trained mental health crisis worker who can respond to calls with officers. That is clearly not enough. "She's one person. She covers all of Linn County," he said. "I would love to have more mental health workers." But it all comes down to money. "Where does that lie?" he asked. "In the budget of the police? In the budget of mental health? Because in my career, the mental health budget has significantly decreased. It has not grown with the problems in society. It really hasn't."

Just before the end of 2020, I spoke with Alex Johnson II, the newly elected mayor of Albany. He was sympathetic both to the housing advocates and to the local police with their strained budget.

Johnson is a former city councilman who sells insurance and referees local football and softball games. He is also the first Black mayor of Albany. He said he wants the city to revisit the downtown three-strikes rule. "The exclusionary zone is crap," he said. Unhoused people are "part of our community. Whether you like that part of our community or not is not my problem. Our job as city leaders is to take care of everybody in our community, not just the people with money."

He thinks that the services in the downtown core should be relocated — and he made a point to note that he is extremely supportive of the local police. He realizes his election presents Albany with an opportunity to change things, to make sure everyone feels served by the city and its police department. "There's been this anti-growth, anti-change, anti-anything-new philos-

ophy in city government for a long time," he told me. Affordable housing is one of his top priorities.

"If Albany doesn't create housing that's affordable, if we don't deal more effectively with our unhoused population, Albany's gonna be a ghost town in 20 years," he said. "My grandkids ... are going to inherit a city that's dying. It's our job not to let that happen."

**WHEN HE DIED**, Plymell joined the modest population of Oregonians who died after being tased by law enforcement in small cities, and whose deaths were ultimately blamed on their own health problems or drug abuse.

Among the group was a 24-year-old student at Southern Oregon University in Ashland. In 2006, Ashland Police officers responded to a report of a suicidal male, a young man passed out in a closet. Upon being awakened, he started to get up and advance toward the officers, who tased him. Authorities blamed his death on an overdose of a sleeping medication. Other examples span demographics and jurisdictions: In 2010, after an 87-year-old Boring, Oregon, woman, threatened to shoot people working near her house, the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office tased the woman, who died. The medical examiner later blamed her heart disease, saying her pacemaker failed. "A healthy person would not have died from this," he concluded. In 2012, a 23-year-old with mental health issues who had smoked spice — a synthetic marijuana substance — died after being tased 24 times by a Talent, Oregon, police officer; a medical examiner concluded that the drugs had caused a heart attack.

Tasers were invented in the 1970s by a NASA physicist who wanted to create a nonlethal conducted-energy weapon to aid police. According to a 2019 study by the National Institute of Justice, they have been "a magnet for controversy" since their wide adoption in law enforcement circles in the early 1990s, given the extreme pain they cause, and the potential

*Unhoused people are "part of our community. Whether you like that part of our community or not is not my problem. Our job as city leaders is to take care of everybody in our community, not just the people with money."*

for fatal reactions.

"They were the next big thing in policing," Seth Stoughton told me. He's a former police officer who is now a professor of law at the University of South Carolina, and the co-author of *Evaluating Police Uses of Force*. He said that "less-lethal" uses of force are in constant rotation: Dogs and firehoses, pepper spray and beanbag rounds, rubber bullets and tear gas. Batons were common until 1991, when violent footage of Los Angeles Police officers beating Rodney King caused law enforcement agencies to re-evaluate their use.

Tasers generally have two modes. Usually, when an officer deploys a Taser, wires connected to barbed prongs fly at the subject, piercing through clothing and embedding in the skin. (This is how Bell used the device when she tased Plymell.) The Taser X26P is commonly carried by law enforcement, including in Albany. Its wires carry pulses of electricity so powerful they cause extreme pain and neuromuscular incapacitation — a loss of muscle control. When Schroff attempted to tase Plymell, however, she used "drive-stun mode," which is when the operator removes the Taser prongs and pushes the device directly against the subject's body in order to cause more localized pain.

But drive-stunning is controversial. In 2011, a mentally impaired South Carolina man who had been committed refused to comply with officers' orders. He was drive-stunned as he sat on the ground, hugging a stop sign, and he died afterward. Stoughton said that the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled "that the Taser is a serious use of force, and for that reason, it is only appropriate as a weapon — whether in prong mode or drive-stun mode — when there is a risk of physical harm to officers."

An investigation published by Reuters in 2017 found that 1,005 people across the United States had died after police tased them. Most of the deaths had occurred since the early 2000s, and many of

the victims were already in some psychological distress. Taser International (now Axon) revised its own training manuals in 2013 regarding the use of Tasers on people with mental health issues. The company said: “Drive-stun use may not be effective on emotionally disturbed persons or others who may not respond to pain due to a mind-body disconnect.” And since 2009, the company has cautioned against using Tasers on the chest. After Plymell’s death, a Taser prong was found lodged near his right nipple.

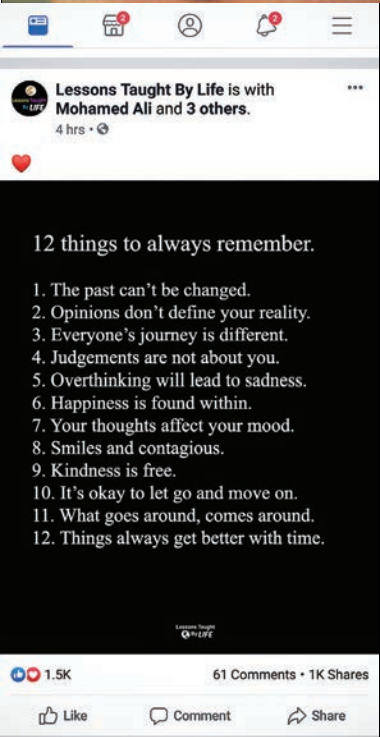
During their investigation, Oregon State Police detectives spoke to several civilians who had either seen Plymell stranded on the side of the road or attempted to push his car for him. He was described as “erratic,” “acting like a tweaker,” and maybe “buzzed on dope.” One person said he repeated 15 times that the car “is light, it’s easy to push.”

“The big picture question we should be asking is what kind of failures, what opportunities were there, to intervene in a different way earlier than could have prevented this guy from being in the disabled vehicle?” Stoughton said.

**IN THE MONTHS BEFORE** his death, Plymell had lived in a recovery house called God Gear. Curtis Parke was a resident there at the same time, and only knew Plymell when he was clean and sober. “He’s a really pleasant, friendly guy,” he said.

He had heard that Plymell’s car had broken down the night before he died, and that he ended up sleeping in the car at Battery X-Change, less than a mile from God Gear. “I often wonder why he didn’t reach out to any of us,” Parke said. “He was right there. We could have done something if he just reached out.” Later, when a detective scoured Plymell’s Nissan for evidence, it turned out it wasn’t completely out of gas, as he’d told police. One of the cables that connected the battery to the car was simply unplugged.

Using records obtained from



Images downloaded from James Plymell's cellphone and placed into evidence following his death. **Albany Police Department via public records requests**

the Albany Police, I was able to look through the contents of Plymell’s cellphone. Just like anyone’s phone, it chronicles at least a part of Plymell’s life — the people he spent his time with, the ones he cared about and those who cared about him.

In June 2019, he snapped photos of a cherry-red Mustang at a used car dealership; Ackroyd and Bourgeois said he bought it with an insurance settlement. (When Plymell died, there was a photograph of a check for \$20,698.94 on his phone from Progressive insurance.) He got new tattoos: an eagle mid-flight, wrestling with a snake in its talons, across his forearm; his last name inked across his shoulders in script.

There were appointments in his phone for court dates and doctors’ appointments. A photo of Ackroyd, smiling, in a red tank top. One of a newly installed sound system in his Mustang, and one in the beat-up Nissan. Pictures of antique clocks and silver coins. Sunrises, sunsets. A selfie of Bourgeois and Plymell, grinning on a trip to the beach in Newport, where they walked along the Bayfront.

He took other selfies, too: smiling in a driver’s seat of his Mustang; smiling in the forest; smiling as he reclined on a couch outside at God Gear, with the words “Jesus Saves” painted on the wall behind him.

And there’s one more selfie, taken in the dark, early in the morning of Oct. 23, 2019. You can barely see him. It’s as if he’s fading, somehow, just a dark outline in the driver’s seat of his car. The following photos are a blur: The floor. The seat cushion. And then one more photograph, taken in the morning, out the window, the bright yellow walls of Battery X-Change coming into view as the sun came up one last time. ☀

*This story was supported by a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.*

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**WILDFIRE MITIGATION SPECIALIST — West Region Wildfire Council.** The Wildfire Mitigation Specialist is responsible for delivering wildfire risk mitigation information, recommendations and programmatic resources to wildland urban interface homeowners, community members and partners. The Wildfire Mitigation Specialist works closely with the Wildfire Mitigation Forester, specifically focusing on addressing wildfire risk in the built environment.

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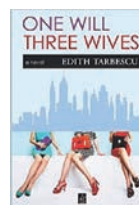
**Copper Stain** — Tales from scores of ex-employees unearth the human costs of an economy that runs on copper. <https://www.oupress.com/books/15051942/copper-stain>.

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LUNA ANNA ARCHEY

# All cracked up

Michael Patrick F. Smith's debut memoir *The Good Hand* offers sharp observations on toxic white masculinity.

BY JASON CHRISTIAN

**DURING THE GREAT RECESSION**, one rare economic exception was Williston, North Dakota, in the heart of the Bakken oil patch, where a fracking boom drew thousands of jobseekers. Fast-food joints paid up to \$15 an hour, while oilfield hands could earn \$200 a day. Prices skyrocketed. The population more than doubled within five years, causing a housing shortage that forced newcomers to sleep in tents, cars or flophouses. Or they piled into trailers corralled together, the notorious “man camps,” a term evoking fistfights, overdoses and sexual abuse. Crime rates soared. The region was overrun.

Set in and around Williston in 2013, Michael Patrick F. Smith's debut memoir, *The Good Hand*, critiques the damaging effects of toxic masculinity on women, families and on men themselves, together with the personal, social and environmental costs of oil and gas extraction. In the oil fields, men like Smith perform dangerous, backbreaking labor, but they also enact a kind of relentless white masculine posturing that punishes any sign of difference or weakness. In immersing himself in their world, Smith excavates the devastating masculine tropes in his own family life. In the end, though, he can't shake his own affection for these damaged, sometimes violent, men, whose respect he craves despite himself.

*The Good Hand* skillfully braids together scenes of life in Williston — in the oil fields, in the bars, at the three-bedroom townhouse Smith shares with 11 others — with historical dives into the region's Indigenous and settler-colonial history, and with troubled memories of the terror his abusive father inflicted on his family.

Smith is a musician who cut his teeth on Sam Shepard's plays and the music of Woody Guthrie and Ramblin' Jack Elliot. In Brooklyn, his home for several years, Smith worked various gigs to sustain his artistic endeavors as a folk-singer, actor and playwright. But he didn't go to

Williston to entertain or to make art. He came to make money as a “swamper,” clocking 15-hour days helping set up and tear down oil rigs. The work turns out to be less about filling his bank account than salving childhood wounds. “My dad never taught me how to do anything,” writes Smith. “He didn't know how to do much himself. This was part of my obsession with becoming a good hand. I wanted to become a person who knew how to work, who knew how to accomplish tasks, who could get things done.”

In time, Smith does become “a good hand,” a quasi-spiritual concept as he defines it: “A person who does honest work to the best of their ability every day and who offers that work to the world as a living prayer.”

Few people achieve this distinction, in Smith's estimation. It's not necessarily the domain of men; Smith's sister, for example, earns the title as a dedicated nurse. But bound up with his reverence for hard work is Smith's mythologizing of the men who do it. Smith connects the men he meets on oil rigs to men on battlefields, such as his great-uncles (“true WWII heroes”) and his father, a paratrooper during the Korean War.

“I lusted for that kind of action,” Smith writes, “I thought that if I went through what he went through I would gain not just insight into his life but respect for him, too.” Though working on an oil field is a far cry from facing open combat, Smith finds that during his nine months in the oil patch, he is able to inhabit a counterfactual reality. He follows the road not taken, becoming, like a method actor, one kind of hardworking man.

But assimilation comes with costs. For the first few months, Smith is the butt of every

joke. Co-workers threaten to arrange for him to suffer a terrible “accident” after he's exposed for having voted for Barack Obama. Smith finds himself compromising his values every second of the day, in a world that discourages asking questions about other men's pasts.

What's more, he blurs the line between bearing witness to, and becoming complicit in, other men's disturbing actions. Smith chastises himself for enjoying “the company of unabashed bigots,” remaining mostly silent around “their casual, constant, continuing faucet drip of racism,” including when his landlord lies to a Black family about a room's availability.

Smith's eventual attempts to address his own racist complicity are weak, coming long after, and at a safe distance from, the world of oil rigs and rough men. He recalls marching in a Black Lives Matter protest after the police murdered Freddie Gray as a profound experience that leads him to “process the racism in my own heart, born of my own complicity, willful ignorance, and shame.”

But ultimately, it's a muddled experience. Smith returns to New York, calling himself a “loose collection of bad habits.” The romantic trappings the author succumbs to by elevating his newfound, if short-lived, brotherhood above its worst instincts overshadow many of his early critiques of masculine trauma. “Even though I'm not a lifer,” Smith concedes, “all of these men are my tribe.” ☼

## The Good Hand

Michael Patrick F. Smith  
464 pages, hardcover: \$29  
Viking, 2021.





Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

**ON MARCH 6, 2020**, a sexagenarian Utahn, who returned to the east shore of the Great Salt Lake after vacationing on the coronavirus-haunted Grand Princess cruise ship, tested positive for COVID-19. It was the pandemic's first knock on Utah's door. Then-Gov. Gary Herbert declared a state of emergency on the same day. In the following months, COVID-19 would spread to over 300,000 people in the state and wreak havoc on at least 12,000 minks, the discreet, short-legged, fluffy mammals known for their colorful, luxurious pelts.

The country's first cases in mink were confirmed in mid-August, when two employees working at Utah fur farms infected five of the

animals. Suspecting spillover of the virus to wildlife, researchers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture began to screen wild animals living close to fur farms that had suffered

disease outbreaks. In December, their fears were confirmed: A wild mink, trapped just outside of a farm, tested positive.

The mink was "asymptomatic"

and "humanely euthanized upon capture to allow for tissue sampling and testing," Gail Keirn, a spokesperson for the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, told *High Country News* by email. At this time, researchers are not concerned that COVID-19 will decimate wild mink populations because the animals' solitary lifestyle provides limited opportunities for them to spread the virus.

COVID-19 upended the fur business in the West last year. Data from the USDA shows that in 2019, multigeneration farms in Utah, Idaho and Oregon yielded more than a third of nearly 3 million mink-pelt products made in the country in 2019. But the industry has declined since its peak in 2014,

## Why Utah's wild mink COVID-19 case matters

How the first positive case detected in the wild could impact the West.

BY WUFEI YU

and the number of pelts produced grown in the United States has plunged by more than a quarter. Compounding that challenge for mink farmers, at least 12 of the more than 30 mink farms in Utah have experienced COVID-19 outbreaks since last August.

In a late December statement, Utah's Department of Agriculture and Food said that COVID-19 had wiped out nearly half of the breeding herds in the facilities. One of Oregon's 11 fur farms was quarantined after an outbreak sickened both minks and humans. Among three minks that had escaped, two tested positive for the coronavirus. Environmental organizations have since argued for the infected plant's closure. "It's clear that this facility poses too great of a threat to wildlife and public health to continue operating," said Lori Ann Burd, environmental health director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

In Denmark and the Netherlands, after minks contracted the virus and passed it on to people, millions of minks were culled and farms were shut down permanently. Danish public health authorities also warned that some variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, contained mutations from the country's fur farm outbreaks. No mink-to-human transmissions have been reported in the United States. But scientists worry about the possibility, and further mutations could hamper the effectiveness of vaccines.

Recently, *High Country News* spoke with Dr. Anna Fagre, a virologist and veterinarian at Colorado State University, hoping to put the recent wild mink outbreak in context. Fagre has studied viral transmission, ecology and wildlife conservation for 12 years and has carried out research on bat viruses, deer mice and livestock in Colorado. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**What are your main concerns about the first coronavirus case detected in the wild?**

It's always concerning when you find a pathogen in wildlife that can make both the animals and people sick. It becomes a risk for wildlife conservation and public health. What worries me is: How did it get there? Researchers who sampled the mink in Utah believe that the positive mink escaped from the fur farm, meaning they were likely infected on the fur farm rather than infected in the wild. It just speaks to the way we are managing animals and encroaching on the environment.

From a conservation standpoint, for wildlife within proximity of people for ecotourism and conservation purposes, we need to consider wildlife as susceptible to any pathogens we carry. We need to be really careful in those situations — just like you will wear a mask when interacting with someone you want to protect. I may have a cold, but who knows what the virus that gives me a runny nose could do to the species I'm sampling or interacting with?

**Human-animal-human jumps of diseases seem rare. But what are the consequences if it happens in the Southwest?**

The incidents of spillback — human-to-animal transmissions of pathogens — are very rarely documented. We could be not detecting them, or they don't make both hosts sick enough to notice. The pathogen has to find a new host in an ecological situation where there is enough interspecies interaction and it can transmit. It has to become a pathogen that's really well adapted in wild hosts in order to get to be circulating all the time. At this point, human-to-human transmissions of SARS-CoV-2 pose greater risk than those between animals and humans.

But for us living in the Southwest, especially around the Four Corners, we have plague, rabies virus, hantavirus and other pathogens that spread from animals to humans on our radar. We see them set up shop in rodent populations. Every year, we see human cases. The risk of disease transmission between wildlife and humans are endemic. Adding another pathogen to think about would be scary.

**What is a sustainable way to check outbreaks in mink farms in the West?**

When animals get crowded and confined and moved around, their immune systems will be compromised. It's the same as humans: You send a bunch of kids to live in the dorms and they're stressed out for finals, and everybody is more likely

to get sick. It raises the question of how sustainable mink farming is, and how this changes fur farming in the United States.

If the industry is going to move forward into the future, as minks in Utah farms were not culled as those in Europe, there should be a vaccination priority. Minks are cute and fuzzy, but we manage them the same way we manage livestock. We vaccinate cattle for respiratory pathogens and against a slew of things they come in contact with. So, yes, due to the way minks are housed, from a health standpoint, a vaccine is very important for herd health.

**Beyond the minks, how vulnerable are other wildlife and animals in this pandemic and future ones?**

I hate to say "silver lining" because there is no silver lining in the madness. But we're fortunate that, so far, many farm animals we rely on for protein aren't susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 like cats and ferrets are.

We are learning from outbreaks of closely related species to the endangered ones. As those who dabble in wildlife conservation saw ferrets and minks are susceptible, it rang an alarm bell for them that the endangered black-footed ferrets could be susceptible, too. In the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center near Fort Collins, Colorado, where humans are caring for the animals, they proactively vaccinated those black-footed ferrets against the coronavirus, as we can't afford to lose that genetic diversity.

There's so much that we're learning about SARS-CoV-2 and the species that it can infect right now. But there's so much we don't know about other viruses and the species they can infect. People think it's scary that wildlife carry all these viruses that could infect us. But it's also really scary thinking about animals getting sick and the impact on wildlife conservation. It's an important time for us to pause and take note and think about how we should interact with wildlife in the future. ☀

*"It's always concerning when you find a pathogen in wildlife that can make both the animals and people sick."*



An installation by the The Painted Desert Project in Bitter Springs, Arizona, created by Jetsonorama in 2009. **Jetsonorama**

## REVIEW

# Desert art, offline

Instagram-ready installations often frame the desert as austere. What are the alternative ways of looking at the land?

BY KYLE PAOLETTA

**ART IN THE DESERT WENT VIRAL** last fall with the debut of a bewitching spear of reflective metal in southern Utah. The so-called monolith, placed in a cleavage of crimson rock miles from the nearest road by an unknown maker, made international headlines and became ubiquitous on Instagram. Hundreds of visitors descended on the site, posting pictures of themselves leaning jocularly against the monolith's sheer sides or offering a vague tribute to St. Simeon by perching atop its 10-foot summit.

The monolith craze was hardly the first time that social media users have obsessed over a sculpture in the desert. The current golden age of this style of art-making began in earnest in 2017, thanks to a homestead of mirrors in the foothills of California's San Jacinto Mountains. The sculpture, Doug Aitken's *Mirage*, took the form of a modest ranch house wrought entirely of reflective glass and situated amid tawny granite boulders. *Mirage* was the headliner to the inaugural edition of Desert X, a biennial exhibit of installations in the Coachella Valley, and it managed to lure 200,000 visitors — and their iPhones — to sites throughout the Mojave. The artwork's popularity came from its clarity of form and the accessibility of its idea: to reimagine a seemingly inhospitable landscape by reframing it in a novel way.

When Desert X returned two years later, artworks that contrasted starkly with their environs proliferated again. Sterling Ruby's *Specter*, a brilliant orange box the size of a shipping container plopped on an expanse of dirt, was the viral breakout. Images of *Specter* quickly became just as pervasive on Instagram as those of *Mirage*, even turning into clumsy inspirational memes, like one that read, "Maybe it's because you don't fit that makes you so easy to love."

Most of the entries at Desert X operate according to the same principle as the Utah monolith: Insert a structure of metal, plastic or glass into the desert to create a contrast that might otherwise only be possible through Photoshop. At best, they read as *zhooz*ed-up versions of the spare, concrete boxes Donald Judd first planted in the yellowed grass of West Texas in 1980, sculptures which helped turn Marfa into #marfa. The 2021 Desert X exhibition, now set to open on March 12 after coronavirus-related delays, will surely follow a similar blueprint. Art this unambiguous makes for a neat composition on a smartphone, but it often fails to evoke emotion beyond superficial wonder. It takes the Southwest's deserts as alien geography, made legible only once an outsider has intervened. Such an approach refuses a deeper reckoning with the desert's ecology or the millen-

nia of human history that have unspooled there.

Art in the desert does not have to treat its open spaces as a vacant background. Consider Nora Naranjo Morse's *Numbe Whageh*, its name drawn from a Tewa phrase that roughly translates to "center place." (Naranjo Morse is a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico.) Completed in 2004, the work of land art resides in Albuquerque's Old Town. From afar, the piece looks like a small hill dotted with chamisa and mountain mahogany. The path that spirals into the artwork, though, traces a descent of surprising depth — on a blazing summer day, the feeling of reprieve that walking it grants is reminiscent of being engulfed by shade trees. At the end of the path is hidden a small spring so well insulated from the noise of the surrounding streets that its burble becomes audible.

Taking a picture of *Numbe Whageh* is impossible; it operates by making the viewer *feel* the arid landscape rather than simply look at it. The Painted Desert Project, an ongoing street art exhibition on the Navajo Nation, has a similar effect. Since the project's inception in 2009, curator Chip Thomas (an artist and physician also known as Jetsonorama, who lives on the reservation) and his collaborators have transformed vacant buildings into arresting, larger-than-life portraits and plastered road signs with statements on the impact of extractive industries. While each entry is photogenic on its own, The Painted Desert Project is best understood as a single artwork: The wall-sized faces and vivid, yellow warnings about uranium pollution accrue, readjusting a passerby's understanding of the region.

The confrontational aesthetic epitomized by the Utah monolith is possible anywhere; indeed, Aitken's *Mirage* has turned into something of a road show over the past four years, appearing in a Detroit warehouse and a meadow in the Swiss Alps. (Desert X itself has expanded more controversially, bringing the biennial to Saudi Arabia last year; the show drew international condemnation, given the Saudi government's human rights abuses.) Meanwhile, Naranjo Morse's work stokes a sense of the desert as an intricately balanced ecosystem, whose rhythms are detectable even at a city's bustling center, while The Painted Desert Project forces acknowledgment of the troubles and triumphs visitors might otherwise overlook. Rather than social media ready-mades, both pieces engage with the reality of a desert rather than a cartoon of it. The result? Creations whose ideas remain rooted in place, indomitable as the earth itself. ☀

# Nogales, then and now

Poet Alberto Ríos finds the city of his youth lives on in surprising places.

BY ALBERTO RÍOS

**I WAS BORN AND GREW UP IN NOGALES,** Arizona, on the Arizona-Sonora border. My wife was born on the Nogales, Sonora, side — a nice cultural symmetry. The border was central to my understanding of the world, but what the border was when I was growing up there in the 1950s and '60s is not what the border is now. My home is sadly hard to find in the great morass of newspaper headlines, speeches, new laws and everything else, much of which may seem to address the border but little of which addresses Ambos Nogales, the two sides of the border, the actual place where real people have lived, live to this day, and where they will continue to live. The Borderlands is not an abstraction. Nor is it defined only by a wall.

In all the talk of the border, that word is used as if it defined this place. But the far greater truth and the more apt word for this place is *desert*. It was true when I was growing up, and it's just as true now. We lived in the desert more than, or at least as much as, we lived at the border. Nature was so often louder in its quietude than people giving orders in uniforms, or fences keeping us and the cows from wandering where we weren't supposed to go. The border made Nogales a major international port of entry, giving us the foundation for produce and tourism, both of which moved through town, but the desert gave us actual place, a geography on which to stand and find a steady footing. For those who live there, the desert, too, has always been a place of scarcity, of sparseness. Making do with what you had was a regular way

of life. It was constant invention.

I was reminded of this the last time I was at the border, when a funny thing happened. I'm not sure "funny" is how people imagine the border, but, in truth, it is the nature of *my* border, which is defined by a myriad of feelings, most certainly including humor. Humor, and making the most of what is around you.

My wife and I had taken a visiting friend on a tour of the state, moving south from Phoenix, where we live, and ending up in Nogales, on the Arizona side. The two Nogaleses, or rather, the one Nogales divided by the barrier of the moment, was alive with itself — tourists, people shopping and going home across the border to Sonora, produce trucks from Mexico being inspected. It was, by this time, a little late in the day, with dusk starting its cricket and wood-smoke entrance. We had not brought passports — a difficult and disagreeable requirement for just crossing over the border, even if only for the evening and nothing more, that I still was not used to. It's a far cry from the amicable circumstance of our growing up, when crossing was often a whole-community event, with the fence thrown open all day for Fourth of July parades and Cinco de Mayo celebrations.

We could only shrug our shoulders and promise to ourselves to be ready the next time we came down here. But this time, instead of crossing, we did what we could. We walked through the old downtown, wandering around Morley Street, talking about the striking storefronts and the life that used to be — like the romantic-sounding corner clothing store La Ville de Paris, whose name is still embedded in the sidewalk — and then inevitably about the wall that now scars the hilly landscape. A pedestrian overpass goes along the border crossing, allowing a view of the immediate other side of the border, the Mexico side. We started our small tour.

That early evening, we saw some young boys standing around talking on the Mexico side of the wall. This was not where people used to gather, so it was curious. In our walking, we had also seen, quite clearly, the array of lights that were now around the streets on the American

side, right up against the wall. They were the kind of lights one might see at a construction site, meant to be temporary, though these had been here for decades. And, to be clear, they weren't going anywhere. Anything marking these lights as temporary was long gone. They suggest a militarizing of the border, clear enough in their purpose of deterring people from crossing illegally. I'm not sure who would actually try to cross there, really, with authorities everywhere around the area, but there the lights stood.

Just after dusk, when the encroaching evening had begun to turn dark, the lights quite suddenly and dramatically came on, making the theatrical sound of big, synchronized machinery, *thap, thap, thap*, even if it was in essence just the turning on of a big light bulb.

But when those lights came on, the world changed.

The elemental nature of light showed itself pure.

The boys we had seen milling around suddenly whooped loudly and threw their hands up in the air. We saw immediately, or rather heard, that they had a basketball. They had attached a basketball hoop to the Mexico side of the wall and, thanks to the inadvertent but indispensable help of the U.S. Border Patrol, could now start their game. We leaned over far enough to see the well-worn hoop, and laughed as loudly as they had. *La migra* — that haunting cry in this place — for a moment in time meant something else. The Border Patrol didn't mean run away.

We watched for a while, and would soon leave for home. In that moment, in that lit-up darkness, I was happy to find again the place in which I had lived. The boys' exuberance was a small moment of adolescence — theirs and mine both. ☀

*Alberto Ríos is a National Book Award finalist, Arizona's inaugural poet laureate, and a recent chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. His latest book is A Good Map of All Things (2020).*

*Making do with what you had was a regular way of life. It was constant invention.*

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# Heard Around the West

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

BY BETSY MARSTON

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## WASHINGTON

It was a “colossal scramble,” reports the *Washington Post*, but in the end not a single one of the 1,600 Moderna vaccine doses was wasted. A freezer malfunction at 9 p.m. sent doctors, nurses and volunteers at Seattle’s Swedish Health Service leaping into action, seeking people eager to roll up their sleeves. Those on priority lists were contacted first, but then word got out and spread like wildfire, said Kevin Brooks, CEO of Swedish. A queue soon formed and “snaked through hallways and spilled outside. ... People were showing up and running down the hall.” Spirits were high, even though some people left home so quickly they lined up wearing pajamas and bathrobes. The deadline loomed, like midnight at Cinderella’s ball: At 3:45 a.m., the vaccine wouldn’t turn into a pumpkin, but it would be just as useless. As the time ticked closer, staff ran outside in the cold, racing to the road, at one point “jabbing someone through the window of a car.” Just as the clock ran out, “one elderly woman in flip-flops was photographed rolling up her sleeve on the sidewalk.” Brooks summed up the experience: “We’re tired and we’re inspired, and those two things are true at the same time.”

## COLORADO

When five young black bears — orphaned last summer — wake up this spring, they’ll probably wonder how they ended up snuggled in a den somewhere on 14,115-foot Pikes Peak, Colorado’s famously photogenic mountain. That’s where Colorado Parks and Wildlife officials took the drowsy, tranquil-

ized youngsters in late January. Tucked into their artificial home under deep snow, the cubs will likely snooze until spring. They’re primed for a long nap: For the last six months, they lived at the Wet Mountain Wildlife Rehabilitation Center where they put on healthy weight — one reached 120 pounds — and also “learned to fear humans,” reports the *Denver Post*. Officials hope that when the bears wake up, they’ll be ready to take on their wild new world.

## THE WEST

Portland-based photographer Brendon Burton is a connoisseur of yard signs, the hand-painted, graffitied kind; they speak to him of nostalgia, even “jealousy for an earlier time.” His new book, *American Poetry*,

celebrates signs he photographed from 2015 to 2020. One of his strangest experiences occurred when he stopped to photograph a sign in front of a Montana gymnasium, which warned, “Do not open, really pissed off bees inside.” As Burton moved closer to the sign, bees suddenly appeared and buzzed angrily around him. “Oh my God, they could have made the sign bigger!” Burton said. “This is inviting you to get stung by bees.” In a way, Burton told *Atlas Obscura*, signs in yards or along back roads are “the original social media,” because “you’re screaming into the void, hoping you’ll get something back.” As the 2020 election got closer, he spent more time in the Pacific Northwest, where political and cultural tensions ran hot between liberal cities and rural towns. “So

the signs are put up to talk to (each other).” In Nevada or North Dakota, however, there were fewer signs and less of this “building fervor.” Perhaps the most poignant sign he recorded was posted by locals in Tiller, Montana, a remote Forest Service outpost of 500 people. Burton grew up not far from the town, which he’d visit in the summer to swim in the river. “WE ARE WORTH SAVING,” the notice said. But Tiller was abandoned anyway, though a millionaire later bought it.

## THE WEST

We came upon a fascinating obituary in the *Jackson Hole News & Guide*. H.L. Jensen, 91, was a denizen of Jackson, Wyoming, for nearly half a century. Jensen’s life was remarkable in many ways, but two incidents stand out. As a young man, he was kicked out of Yellowstone National Park for a prank at Old Faithful. Jensen and his friends, fueled by beer, hauled out a car’s steering wheel and column, stuck it into the ground near the geyser, then just as the geyser got ready to blow, one of them yelled: “Turn it on” and spun the wheel, “making Old Faithful go.” Onlookers chortled, but a park ranger was not amused. Jensen’s second feat of derring-do was even more impressive: running for the Wyoming House of Representatives as a *Democrat*. In the 1970s, this was a “shocking thing that made him a political unicorn.” That he actually won — serving eight two-year terms — was even more shocking. “He was a guy who liked to help people, provide whatever help the government could,” explained a Republican friend. ☀



Armando Veve / HCN

# **DID YOU KNOW?**

## **Wolves do not kill for sport.**



Wolves do not kill for sport. A large body of research puts this fallacy to rest. They kill prey to feed themselves. Wolves risk serious injury or death hunting prey like elk, bison or moose that are many times their size.

While wolves fail to secure a kill in 75% of hunts, they and other carnivores occasionally kill more animals than they can immediately consume, particularly in late winter when prey is weakened.

Often scared away by people, wolves return to these food reserves for weeks or months until they, and a host of other wild animals feeding on their kill, have finished it off. There is no waste or sport.

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# #IAM THE WEST

**PAPAY SOLOMON**  
**Portrait Painter**  
**Phoenix, Arizona**

Faces have a great way of recording history. I want to record that history. All of my portraits are tailored to the people who are in them. I don't waver from the intimacy; I embrace it fully. Self-portraits are the hardest. The only way you can reflect on yourself is if you're willing to really look at yourself. That's tough. Even when I'm painting other people, I feel like I'm painting an extension of myself. Which is a blessing and a curse. If history had been different — especially in the context of Western art and Western portraiture — I wouldn't need to paint myself. That puts artists of color in this position where we have to record, because people who are recorded are people who are remembered. So that's a privilege and a curse. I have to move the canon forward. I'm here, we're here. It's as simple as that.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?  
Let us know on social.

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