

COAL TRAINS, from page 12

Their stated purpose: to promote “equal rights” by teaching residents how to attack tribal sovereignty.

The conference was organized by Skip Richards – a man who organized militias for the Wise Use movement in the 90s. One of his meetings in October 1994 featured conspiracy theories about a possible United Nations takeover of Washington state, possibly aided by environmentalists. The meeting was co-hosted by Ben Sams – who had earlier submitted paperwork to Snohomish County renouncing his citizenship and declaring his legal status as a “white sovereign state citizen” – a declaration other “sovereign citizens” use to dodge taxes under fake legal arguments. Just a few days after the October meeting there was a cross-burning and shooting at a nearby migrant workers’ camp.

Richards’ 2013 conference was announced by local tea party activist Kris Halterman on his radio show. According to area journalist Terri Hansen, Halterman also created two political action committees in the fall of 2013 to support the anti-Indian, pro-coal agenda: SAVEWhatcom and WhatcomFirst. Both have received over \$145,000 from the coal developers. According to legal complaints, four of the top five donors to Whatcom First are in the coal or coal export business.

Spokane attorney Dave Lundgren calls the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance “The Ku Klux Klan of Indian Country,” saying their members “are afraid of being regulated by brown people, and by the efforts of tribes under federal law to reclaim lost homelands.”

One key to CERA’s strategy certainly appears to be bad history. According to Terri Hansen of Mother Earth Journal, one CERA group in southern Oregon calling itself the Klamath Basin Alliance publicly opposed the return of land to the Klamath Tribe that had been stolen by timber companies during the era of termination, claiming such an act of restoration would foster “separatism, apartheid, and racism.” They go on to ask “Why should the taxpayers foot the bill to buy land to establish a separate country for the Klamath Tribes?” How such an argument fits with history is beyond explanation, but it doesn’t stop CERA from making them, or from filing lawsuits.

Lundgren explains “Groups like CERA tap into that undercurrent of local racism and provide a forum for people to express their fears through the disguise of bogus legal arguments. CERA provides manufactured legal arguments like the Klan provides white, hooded robes for people to hide behind.”

Inside the anti-Indian conference in 2013, Philip Brendale outlined a legal strategy “to take these tribes down” and “to strike a most devastating psychological blow to Northwest tribes’ pride and their sense of well-being.”

Who would fund this legal strategy? Brendale is glad you asked: of course, it would be the “large coal companies and the railroads that mine and haul millions of tons of coal,” – an obvious reference to the Gateway Pacific terminal near the Lummi Nation. Brendale went on to suggest that deposit the money into his own non-profit organization – enabling them “to finance a winning case without getting their corporate hands dirty”.

The conference may have signaled a real change in strategy – after Lauri Hennessey left the Alliance for Northwest Jobs at the end of 2013, she was replaced by Mariana Parks. Parks had served as deputy state director for U.S. Sen. Slade Gorton – a man who spent much of his career attacking tribal fishing rights in Washington state. In Oregon, the Rural Organizing Project has been tracking similar extreme right groups who seek the return of a simpler and more

racist America. Like CERA, many of these groups appropriate civil-rights language to scrub the blood stains of American history, using the term “equal rights” to rationalize a hatred of minorities – indeed, imagining themselves to be the real minorities in order to, “steal the injury.”

One of these groups is the Oath Keepers – a group that claims its members have an ultimate allegiance to protect the Constitution. What does that mean? You can look for yourself in their list of “Orders We Will Not Obey” – which claims that its members, including numerous sheriffs and ex-military members, will never participate in the hostile takeover of the United States (perhaps by the United Nations?) or in the imposition of “martial law.”

The Oath Keepers took their central idea of posse comitatus – essentially the divine rule of the county sheriff – from a famous

LEARN MORE

At the end of August, Jewell James, a tribal elder and master carver at the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation, will be traveling through Portland on a totem pole journey. This will be the third of James’ regional journeys drawing attention to the threat of fossil fuels, both to the earth’s climate and the local landscapes that we call home. The gathering will take place at St. Phillip Neri Catholic Church from 6:00 - 7:30 p.m., August 24, 2015.

Silver Shirt named Henry Beach from Portland. The Silver Shirts, of course, was the famous U.S. Nazi organization that modeled themselves after the brown shirts during WWII, and even took money from Nazi Germany to build Hitler a world conquest headquarters in Los Angeles, Calif. In 2013, 21 Oregon sheriffs were members of the parallel group Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, according to the Rural Organizing Project.

Last year in Josephine County, armed Oath Keepers converged in Grants Pass after two gold miners were informed by the Bureau of Land Management that they were out of compliance with regulations and had to stop mining. The tension did not escalate, but the situation certainly revealed that these networks exist, and who they exist for.

The Christian anti-militia

Thankfully, the dominant trend among Christian churches has been toward an alliance with their neighboring tribes, and even toward a spiritual understanding of ecology. In 1987, Christian churches in the Northwest sent heartfelt letters of apology to their local tribal governments and spiritual leaders.

In 1997, these and more churches re-affirmed “an apology for long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices.” The letters acknowledged the church’s role in the violent colonization of the Pacific Northwest, and the program of assimilation that deprived Native Americans not only of their land, but of their culture and spiritual practices. Until 1934, it was still illegal for Native Americans to practice their own religions. Many Pacific Northwest tribes continued to perform their ceremonies. They did so discreetly, on American holidays like the 4th of July, and told their federal overseers that their dances and rituals were celebrations of the United States, when in fact they were in reverence for the land the United States was sitting on, and for their ancestors who were buried there.

“We offer our commitment to support you

in the righting of previous wrongs... to encourage the members of our churches to stand in solidarity with you on these important religious issues,” reads the 1987 letter. “May the God of Abraham and Sarah, and the Spirit who lives in both the cedar and Salmon People, be honored and celebrated.”

The first of these letters came from a visit by Jewell Praying Wolf James, a spiritual leader with the Lummi Nation who has worked for over 30 years as a cultural ambassador, indigenous rights advocate and environmental defender. James is a descendant of the legendary Duwamish leader Chief Seattle, and hearing him explain Lummi history has a tendency to evoke stunned tears from all those listening.

When he first came to the Christian congregations to share stories from the Lummi Nation, he made no request of his audience, but they were so moved that they circulated a letter among Christian leadership in the Northwest churches. This letter became a formal declaration: the churches wanted to atone for their past, and they also wanted to move beyond guilt and actively stand with the Lummi Nation.

According to Jessie Dye of Earth Ministry, “Jewell pulled out the letter of apology near the end of 2011 and said ‘You asked us to call when we need you. We need you now.’” Church leaders were invited to meet representatives of the Lummi Nation at Lummi Bay. Not knowing what the meeting was for, Church leaders showed up to the beach, where they sat respectfully as the Lummi announced their opposition to the biggest coal port in North America, unveiled a giant mock-up of a million dollar check from the coal developers, and sent it up in flames.

The turn of our local Christian churches is not unique – reconciliation, and decolonization, is happening everywhere. Canada recently concluded a five-year process of truth and reconciliation for indigenous boarding schools, and their Supreme Court has made numerous decisions that honor the close relationship indigenous peoples have with their land.

During a recent papal visit to Bolivia, even Pope Francis apologized for the “grave sins” of colonialism, saying, “I say this to you with regret: Many grave sins were committed against the Native people of America in the name of God.”

With the pope now backing them up, the Northwest Christian churches are joined by Unitarians who are promoting their own process of reconciliation, asking for support from faith leaders and those spiritually inclined, to protect sacred land and stand up against hatred.

Support Street Roots’ outstanding vendors and great journalism.

Give a one-time or recurring donation today
streetroots.org

