One Country Without Borders

A Year in the Grasslands with Harold Rhenisch

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Wednesday, 24 October, 12

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We begin a long way away from the grasslands. These are the vineyards of the Kaiserstuhl, in Southern Germany. When early European farmers looked up to the hills and riverbanks, they saw wild grapes such as the ones in the foreground here. From them, they made a wine culture and a wine industry.

In Germany's Mosel Valley, ridgeline forests generate bacteria, which water carries down through shale scree slopes. Grape vines planted in the scree are maintained by these bacteria. Unused water trickles out to the river, then flows to the Rhine and the sea. It will return again as rain, to restart the process. This region produces the best Riesling wine in the world, on slopes otherwise unusable to agriculture. It has also been successfully maintained for 2000 years.

Rather than adopt native plants, settlers in the North American West imported European crops, such as these grapes growing on the Bella Vista Hills. Unlike the vineyards of the Mosel and the Rhine, they need to be maintained with water piped down from the high country.

This is the same row of vines seen in the preceding image. To maximize economic profit in a worldwide glut of grapes, this farmer is leaving them on the vine late to create ice wine. Only tiny amounts of waterless juice will be extracted from this crop, to produce an expensive luxury product for international markets. Unfortunately, birds and rot have claimed something like 90% of the grapes here. All in all, in a climate acutely short of water the thousands of litres of irrigation water removed from the valley and given to these vines is largely wasted.

On the border of this same vineyard native choke cherries thrive, without irrigation or care of any kind. Wild cherries have a balance of acids and sugars suitable to a cider industry. They produce unique preserves, also worthy of production. They are left for the birds.

So, let's go to the beginning, to the land itself. Let me show you where we are, so we know, together, where we are going. This, for instance, is the view from the grassland meadows of Kobau Mountain, over the Similkameen Valley, to Snowy Mountain. In behind are the Cascades and the Pasayten Wilderness of Washington. I began here. My bones are made of this ground. This photograph was taken in the late 1980s.

Cawston

A few minutes down the valley, the Similkameen River curls at the feet of the mountains in behind and crosses into Washington. Hurley Peak, to the left, and Chopaka, to the right, are the centre of the Similkameen World, and of the world of the Syilx. The Okanagan itself was a travel corridor. This was the holy mountain. In 1859, the few American miles of the Similkameen held about 10,000 placer and hard rock gold miners.

A little further to the south, on the old main highway to Loomis and Conconully, the ancient landmark of Split Rock lies on the shores of Palmer Lake. Ore from a local mine was once processed just north of here, on land that went on to hold orchards and now is going to grass.

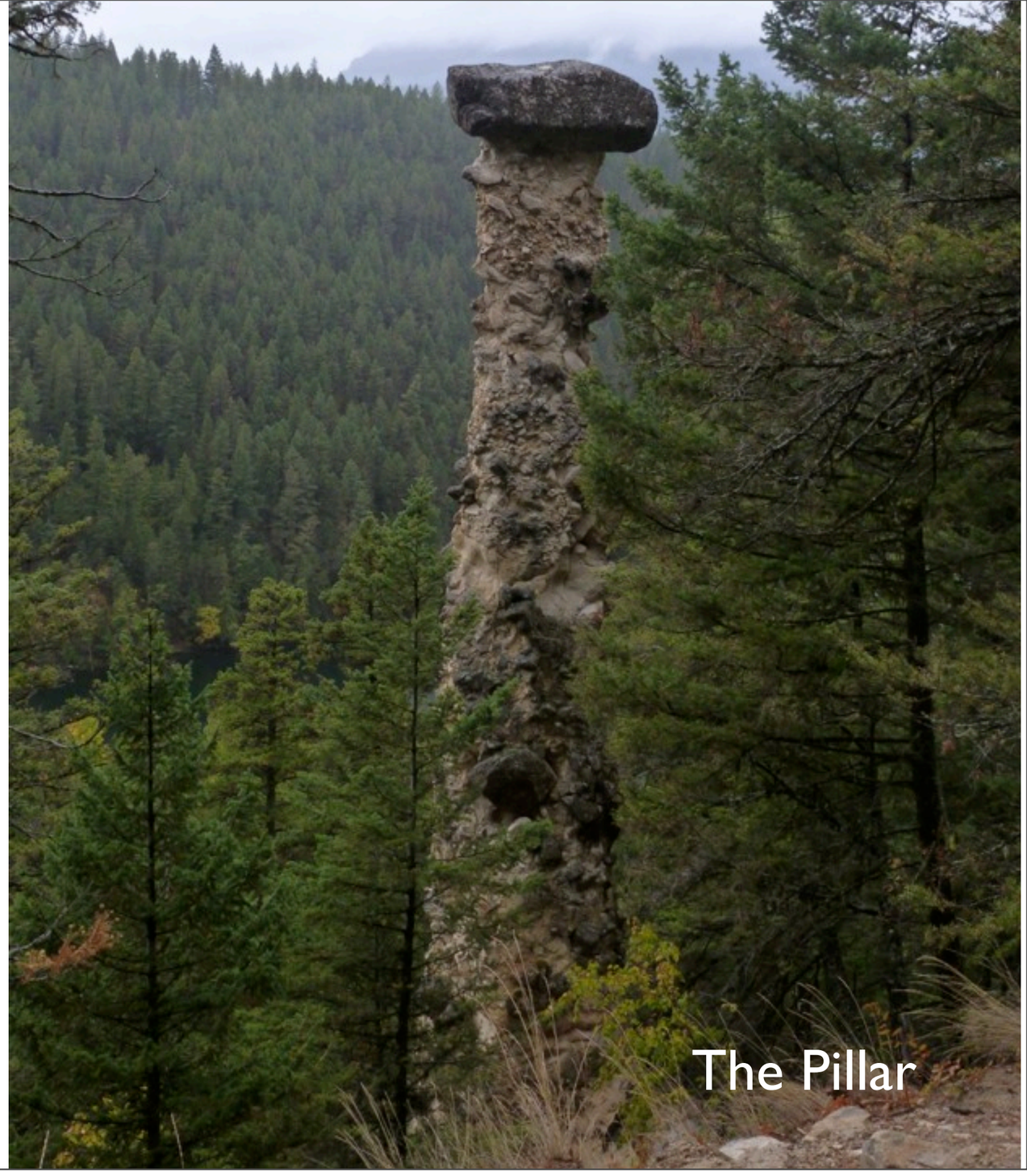
On the northern shores of Palmer Lake, a horse checks me out from a semi-abandoned almond orchard. When I was a young man, we looked south to Palmer Lake with envy, thinking that this nut industry would revitalize agriculture in the both the Similkameen and the Okanagan. Now this horse comes up to the road to beg a few roadside weeds from whoever goes by.

Palmer Lake

Conconully

The truth is, here in Northern Washington, the US Canadian Border creates poverty. This is the far north of the USA, a place few travel to and almost at the end of the earth. North of here, most American maps are blank. Just a few miles north, in Canada, though, in the same valley, it is the deep south, full of vineyards and tourists and wealth. Once the county seat, Conconully is now populated largely by ex-military men, in a kind of campground and biker culture in a Roosevelt-era work camp between two water reservoirs.

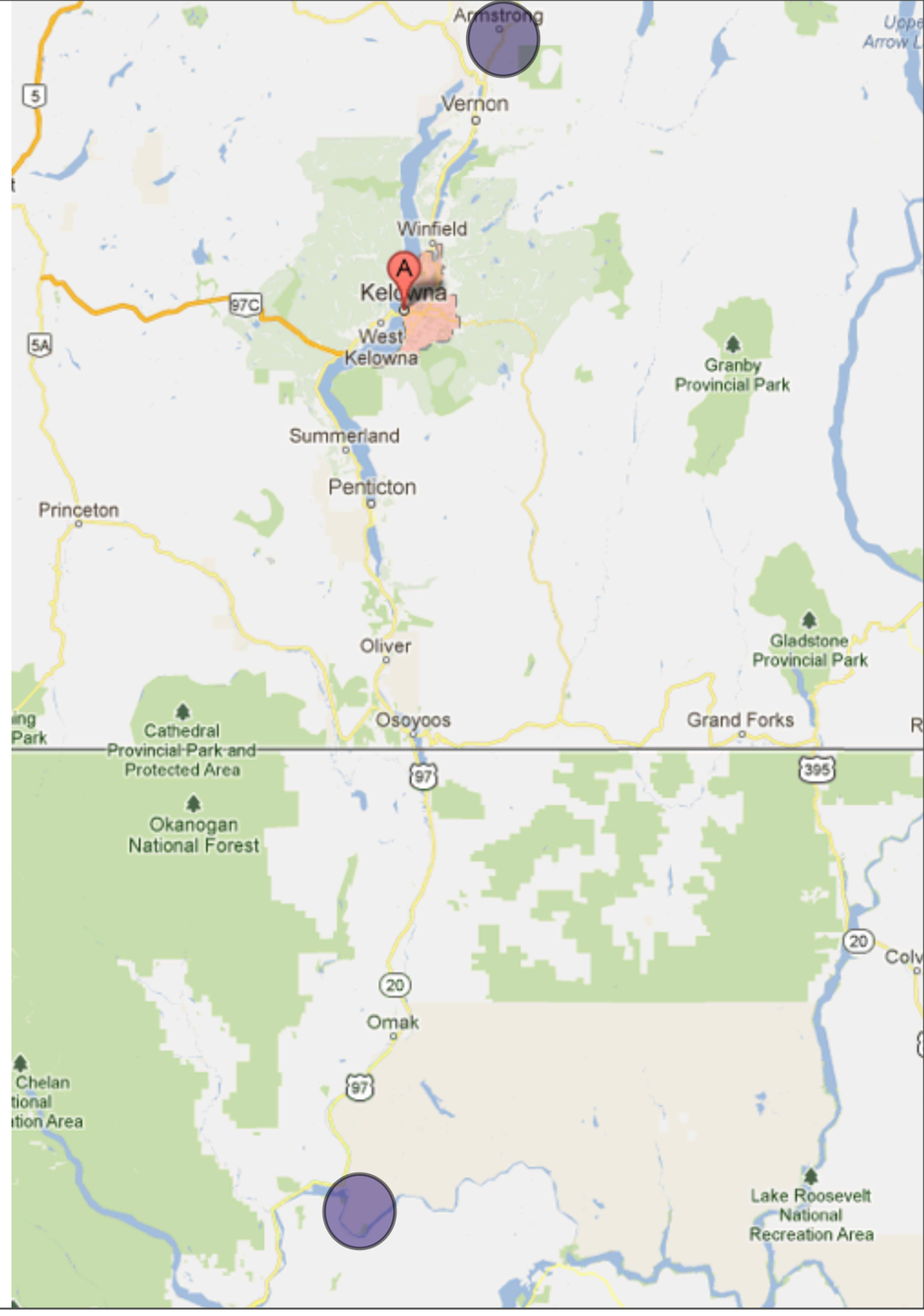
Another centre of the world is at Pillar Lake, at the northern reach of the glacial bed of the Okanagan. The Syilx call this the bones of our mother. It certainly is. In another version of the same story, this is known as a remnant of the glacial and post-glacial till that once filled this valley, and which washed away to form ...

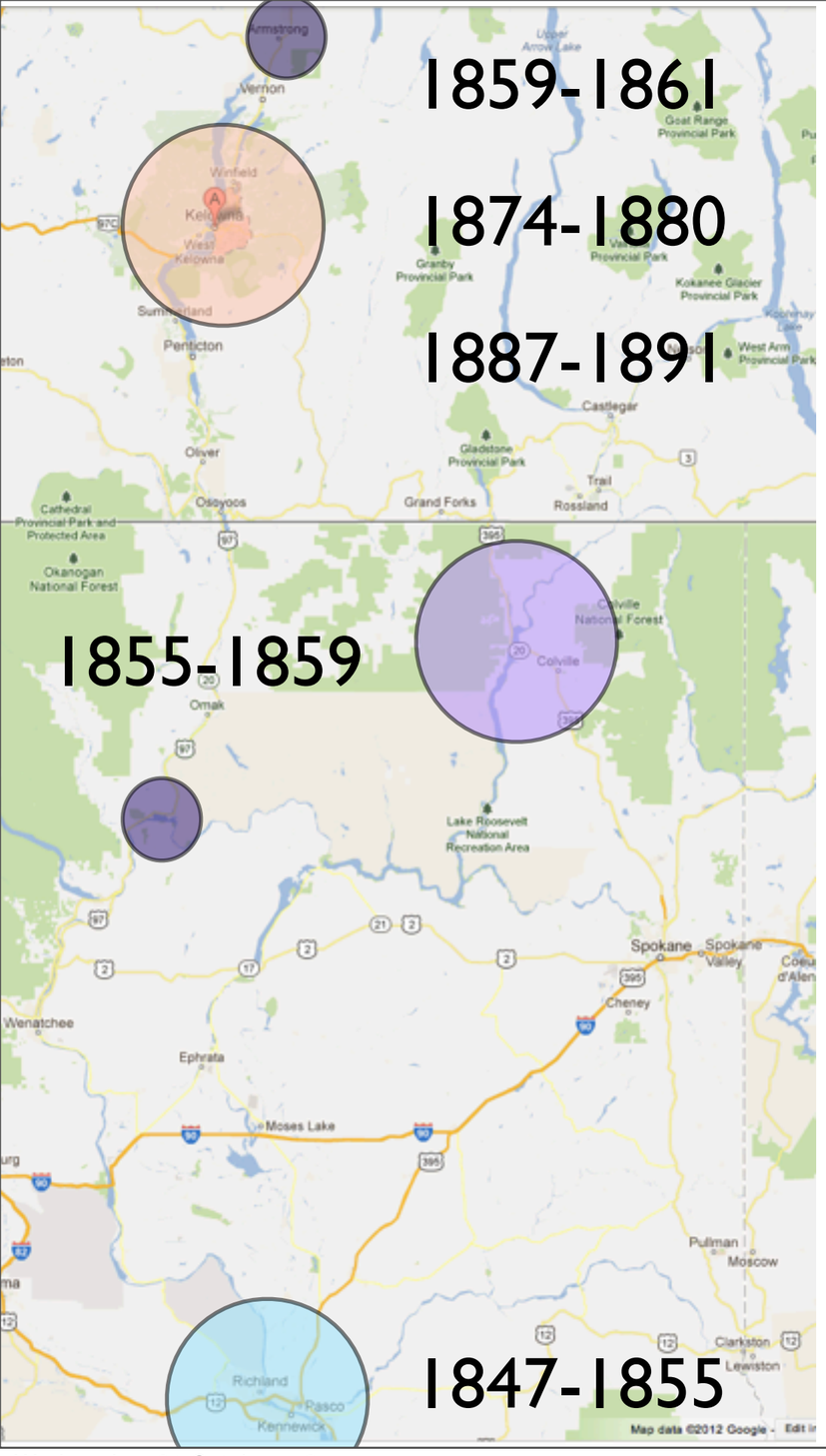


The Pillar

... the silt on the bed of Glacial Lake Penticton. Once 150 metres deeper than the current lake in the floor of the valley, it vanished over three and a half days, when the ice dam holding in place broke at the end of the glacial age. The waters surged south, and helped to carve out the so-called scablands of Eastern Washington. The lakes that remain, Okanagan Lake, Kalamalka Lake, Wood Lake, Ellison Lake, Skaha Lake, and Vaseaux Lake, still hold this ancient glacial water. We look up here from the shore of Okanagan Lake to the base of Lake Penticton's old bed.

When I started this project, I named it Okanagan Okanogan, to stress that the border was nothing here, and that we were one nation, settler and indigenous, Canadian and American, in one valley, with one history, stretching from the mouth of the Okanagan at Brewster, Washington, to its headwaters, just north of Armstrong, British Columbia, between the two purple circles to the right. What I learned from a year of wandering in the grass, was that the land was much larger, and the only way to fully understand it was to go where the Syilx once went, not up and down the river and along its lakes, but deep into the Plateau. It's only the 1858 border that separated the Canadian Okanagan from the grasslands of Washington, Idaho and Oregon.





The country looks a little bit more like this. This map indicates the approximate span of traditional Syilx territory, which overlapped with that of the other Plateau peoples, to which they were closely related. The two purple circles here indicate the span of the Okanagan. The other circles, and their dates, mark missions of the Oblate father, Charles Pandosy. He began as a missionary to the Yakimas in the south and was evacuated to Colville (in the middle of the map) by the US Army during the Yakima War. He pleaded to be returned to his "beloved Yakimas," but was sent to Kelowna in the North, in British Territory, instead — largely because the US Army saw him as an "Indian Lover" and a "Catholic," both of which they didn't want in their new, Methodist territory. Pandosy spent little time in Kelowna. During his absences, he founded missions in Esquimalt and Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island, at St. Mary's Mission in the Fraser Valley, and at Stuart Lake in the far north. Two years were also spent on a trip to France, to rescind his claim that the US Army had destroyed his mission at the mouth of the Yakima River, believing that he was spying against the Americans. (Actually, it was irregular hangers on of the Army who destroyed his mission, as well as his grammar of the Yakima language [the only one ever made]. A nice legal difference.) Pandosy was excellent at befriending indigenous peoples, but not at converting them. Then the professionals moved in and took over. Ironically, Pandosy is known as the father of white culture in the Okanagan, a kind of Johnny Appleseed, although he really had gone native, and ministered mostly to métis French Canadian Hudsons' Bay Company men, who too had been driven north out of the new Washington Territory and had no desire to return east, where anti-métis politics were heating up. Washington history is Okanagan history.

What does Pandosy's country look like? Well, like this. This is a view over the eastern arm of Okanagan Lake at Okanagan Landing. The slope in the foreground burnt a few days before, in August. This valley was cultivated by the Syilx for 10,000 years by fire. This is what it usually looked like.

What kind of country is it? It's a hot, near desert of shrub steppe, that also experiences deep cold — often at the same time. A traditional temperature range on the grasslands is from Minus 40 to Plus 50 degrees Celsius.

Humans aren't the only people who live here. This bullsnake was cooling himself off on an early August day on a vineyard road, just before a tractor came by. Having seen too many bullsnakes that had run into arguments with tractors, and had lost, I encouraged him to move on. He was Not Pleased.

Our brothers and sisters the deer people are everywhere in this country. They especially like shrubberies. The more expensive and exotic the shrubbery, the more they like it. Here they are, moving back up into the hills on a September afternoon, after a long day grazing in subdivision gardens.

It's a beautiful country, with rich, productive vegetation. These smooth sumacs rim a vineyard along the Similkameen, on the old mine road to Palmer Lake and Loomis.

Some of the people who live here are really appreciative of human construction efforts. Here, a couple of black widows happily hunt in my basement. I was fine with this, until they built a huge net in front of my deep freeze, to catch me, I think. Gad.

We have some really cool plants here, too. These glassworts are colonizing the salty margins of a salt lake in the north of Kelowna. The lake is an important stopover point for migrating swans and gulls.

The goddess lives here, too. Here she takes the form of a green sweat bee on a mariposa lily. These bees raise about twenty-five young, individually, underground. When they harvest pollen from chicory, their legs are white, not yellow. When I saw that, I started dreaming of a white pollen industry. I mean, how cool is that?

Sacred spaces abound on this land. This is Umatilla Rock in Dry Falls State Park...

... and these are some of the people who live on the rock.

Immigrants love it here, too, of course, such as these starlings enjoying a late afternoon.

The goddess is also happy to take the form of preying mantisses here. These amazing insects (this one was about 14 centimetres in length) aren't native here, but they're not leaving, either. The Syilx revere them as models of parenthood.

Western Painted Turtles love the place, too. Here, one swims in the water that fills the old sacred grasslands of the Sinlahekin Valley. This water irrigates the orchards of Okanogan and Omak.

Conconully Reservoir

In the Hanford Reach, the white bluffs, containing the glacial soil of half of the West, stretch like this for twenty miles along the Columbia River.

White Bluffs

Horses from the Okanagan Indian Band herds walk along a ridgeline on a late winter afternoon. It was the combined pressure of American settlement in the Ohio Valley, as its consequences rippled across the continent, as well as the introduction of horses to the Great Plains that pressured the Plateau peoples to set aside much of their cooperative community life and to divide strongly into individual, competitive nations, with disastrous consequences. In my project, I make a case for coming together again, rather than for allowing external forces to continue pushing us apart.

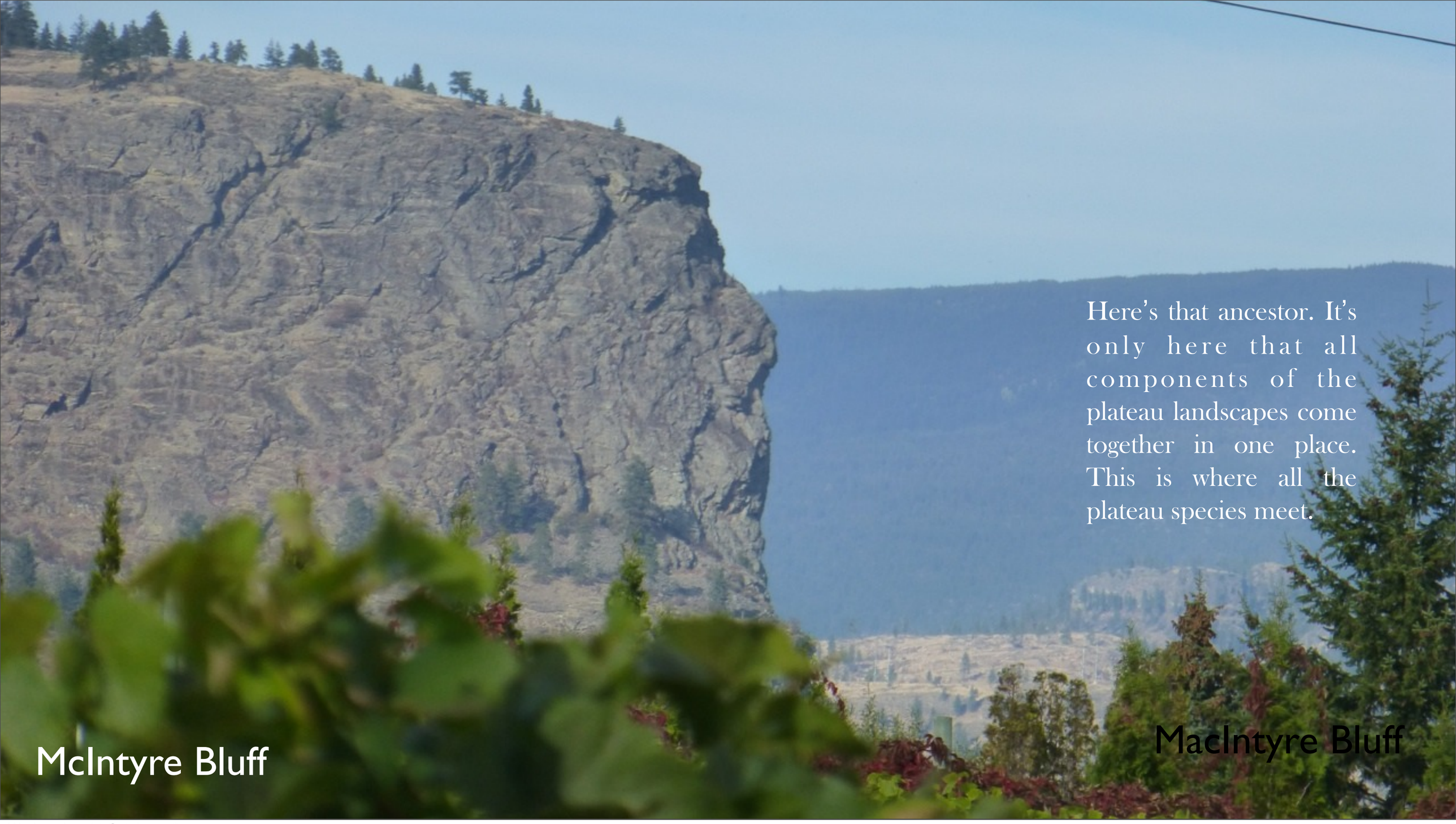
Even the rocks are beautiful here. The Okanagan fault slipped 100 kilometres, with resulting volcanic stress. We live on the bones of an ancient story.

At the end of the Wisconsin Glaciation, 10,000 years ago, more water flowed over these falls in Central Washington than currently flows in all the rivers of the world. It ate back nearly thirty miles into the volcanic rock.

Dry Falls

We are not alone. We share this land. It is, in effect, not ours. We belong to it.

In Syilx terms, the land is a story, not a geology. The bluff in the background anchored the ice dam that made Glacial Lake Penticton — in one story. In the Syilx story, it is one of the ancestors, to which the salmon return. In these last two and a half miles of pristine sockeye spawning grounds in a river system that once supported 30,000,000 fish a year, the annual Syilx fishery begins.


Here's that ancestor. It's only here that all components of the plateau landscapes come together in one place. This is where all the plateau species meet.
McIntyre Bluff
MacIntyre Bluff

In an old Syilx story, Turtle became chief of all the animals when he convinced Eagle to carry him up high and to race him back to the earth. Turtle fell like rock. Here he is, and ...

Turtle Mountain

Turtle Mountain

... here is Eagle on his back, looking west towards Okanagan Lake. When Eagle conceded his claim to chieftanship, Turtle gave it to all the animals, declaring them all equal. It is an ancient wisdom story, that just happens to be written in the bones of the land. So it is for people who are rooted to a place and make even their own intellectual traditions out of its materials.


Even the rock of this ancient volcano looks like a turtle shell.
Turtle Mountain

And across the mountain, there are turtle eggs, laid right within the rock that the turtle lies upon. The thing about this story is ...

Turtle Island

...that it appears to be universal on the Plateau. It appears that every Plateau people had a turtle at their heart. Here is Turtle Island, on the Columbia just north of Wenatchee...

... and here is a turtle at the feet of Umatilla Rock, in Dry Falls ...

Peshastin Pinnacles

... and here is one looking out of one of the Peshastin Pinnacles, an ancient site above the Wenatchee River between Wenatchee and Leavenworth. The site is used now by climbers, and bears evidence of long use by indigenous climbers and gatherers. This is another centre of the world, where the centre is a place in the heart, not a place on a map.

This is the eagle that lives beside the turtle at the Peshastin Pinnacles. Notice the skull that is its eye. What do these old stories mean? Are they natural or human made? No one knows. They are so ancient that only the stories of them remain. This makes them among the most valuable sites in the world.

Peshastin Pinnacles

Okanagan Falls

Here's an ancestor at Okanagan Falls. These creatures can be best understood when one moves on foot. Their stories unfold as one moves around them and over them and the perspective of the land changes at the speed of human footsteps. They are animated like film — film you have to walk through. I'm telling these stories, because they are keys to understanding how to move through this land on its own terms, and how, and when, and where, to stand still.

I'm also telling them, because their interpretation matters. For instance, this stone creature at Rattlesnake Island is known in White culture as Ogopogo, and is sought after by cryptozoologists as a plesiosaur living in the lake, when in fact it is the mountain. That creature swimming in the water makes for a nice story, but the real story is a way of being the land.

Ogopogo
(from Peachland)

Here it is, looking north from Greata Ranch. As you can see, there are multiple animals living on this shore, said to have an underground lair on Rattlesnake Island, which you can make out in the middle left of this image. Think of this for a moment: the water is 150 metres above this level. These creatures were underwater. Now they are in the light. The stories here are very, very old. There is a reason why stories are remembered for so long, and why they are told, and retold, and remade, and told again. They are telling us something.

Here is a different kind of story. It has an ancient plateau bluff, an ancient salmon river (the Columbia), the grassland gardens of the Colville Indian Reservation, some French shrubberies, an English lawn, and a red maple from the Eastern USA. It tells the story succinctly of the step-by-step political process by which Americans made this land into an image of the East, before granting it statehood. It's a beautiful and powerful story, but it is not, in any way, an image of the land.

Chief Joseph Dam Viewpoint

This is the end result of that process. Here, the living earth has been transformed into a desert supporting a few hungry cows. Whatever else can be said, whatever viewpoint one holds on any of that, the form of land use present in this picture is not acceptable. What kind of a man would set his cattle out to graze on the few scraps of wild alfalfa that escaped a devastating fire just days before? One who believes fervently in private property.

This is an experimental agricultural plot at the University of British Columbia in Kelowna. It has succeeded in transforming the earth into a desert of shade cloth, abandoned lavender, weeds, and plant bodies stuffed into plastic bags. This process shows a profound lack of respect for life. It is also unacceptable.

At Summerhill Winery, high above Okanagan Lake, plastic bubbly flows perennially into a plastic glass, out of a plastic bottle as large as a small truck. Note the waterfall and the little tropical Garden of Eden at its base! This, folks, is art at its best, although it's not the land, either.

The vines in this image of a vineyard in Okanagan Falls before harvest are covered with netting, to keep off birds, the hills are laced with the trails of deer trying to navigate the barrier of vineyard fences to get to the water in the valley below, and the grass is full of weeds. Installations of European agriculture are maintained here at great expense. Not a penny goes into maintaining the land. In fact, great efforts are made to keep it away.

Oliver Ranch Road

I was talking to the farmer picking these apples. “I have too many Nicolas,” he said. We both agreed that this new variety was a total bust, in an industry that had retooled to look like this in order to exploit the high prices from new varieties. The farmer went on to say that he had too many Royal Galas — one of the new varieties that brought the first push towards this form of agriculture thirty years ago but which now pay nearly nothing. We made an agreement that we’d talk later about grafting a few acres of Galas over to something new. For all of the millions of dollars of investment here, no money is being made. That’s where we’ve come to.

We've come to this. In the main city of the Okanagan, Kelowna, 30,000 people visit the food bank every year, while these D'Anjou pears go unpicked just a few miles away. The environmental writer Roderick Haig-Brown noted three generations ago that the health of a government's resource policy could be determined by an examination of the health of the state's citizens. The same can be said about agricultural and food distribution policies, or, in the lack of policies, cultures.

Okanagan Falls

In an attempt to circumvent these problems, for two generations the Canadian Okanagan has successfully developed itself as a retirement and resort destination. This grassland development, complete with Provençal and Southwest touches, built to capture the sun and the images of the lake that draw investors out of the prairies, illustrates one irony of that approach: in the winter, the fogs set in and there is no sun, for months, while on the prairies, where the sun image came from, it goes on the whole winter long. Oops.

And so, in Kelowna, one of Canada's major metropolitan areas, a source of great wealth, things have come to the state of affairs we see here: sophisticated real estate developments, international hotel chains, automobiles every whichaway, a forty kilometre long strip of malls, fast food restaurants,, designer cafés, brew pubs, box stores and car, boat, RV and motorcycle dealerships, as well as trees butchered (aka pruned) by people who know absolutely nothing about trees and keep them, presumably, for decoration (although it's hard to tell.) Whatever else, the culture that dominates here is not a culture tied to its horticultural roots. That it frequently claims to be so in order to sell wine and hotel rooms is a story impoverished by its lack of branches.

Kelowna

Chief Joseph Dam,
Columbia River

The Chief Joseph Dam is the second largest hydroelectric producer on the Columbia, second only to Grand Coulee Dam itself. Industrialization of landscape is the American metaphor for development, and represents the effort of transforming native space into the American East. Chief Joseph was one of the war chiefs of the Nez Perce, who were dispossessed of their land when American adventurers broke an American treaty, occupied legal Nez Perce territory, and called for American aid when things turned sour. Joseph managed to get the Nez Perce repatriated to the West from the Cherokee Indian Reservation but only to the Colville Indian Reservation and the Mission at Pendleton, not to their own country in Idaho. The dam, and the power it generates, is the manner in which respect is shown for Joseph's story. It is meant sincerely.

Welcome to Soap Lake, Washington. Joseph used to come down here from the reserve at Nespelem and soak his bones in the medicinal waters and mud of this ancient sacred lake. When the Grand Coulee was dammed just above Coulee City, an hour's drive to the north, and filled with water to irrigate the Columbia Basin, Soap Lake thought it was the gateway to a recreational paradise of boating, fishing and sunbathing in the desert sun. Some parts of Canada's Okanagan have suffered the same fate. Those that have survived depend on the allure of orchards, vineyards and undeveloped land close to water – all things that are in jeopardy today.

Soap Lake

Waterville

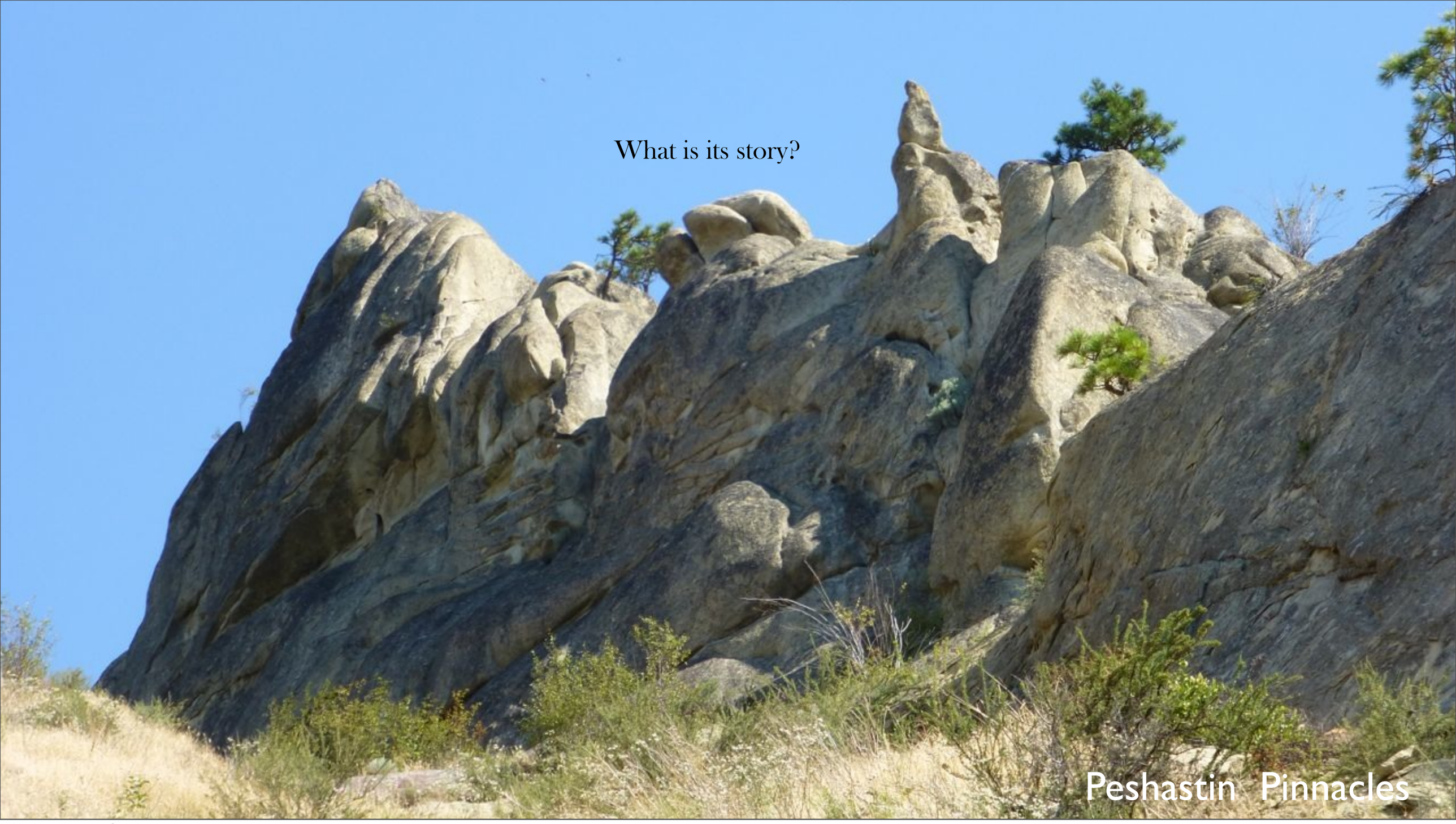
Up on the plateau between Wenatchee and Coulee City, however, the fertilizer trucks do a steady business in the spring. Industrial farming is prosperous here, although once thriving towns, such as Waterville, which this truck will reach in a few seconds, see no benefit from it. The economy is national, not local, in a continuing purification of the original settlement dynamic.

A teen fooling around with a lighter at the corner of the road set this cheatgrass hillside ablaze in August. Two days later, I found members of the Okanagan Landing Volunteer Fire Department patrolling the fire scene, searching for hot spots. Many of the men didn't want to go up the hill, on account of rattlesnakes stirred up by the fire. Fire that was once a major farming tool in the valley has become so rare that it burns freakishly hot now. For all of the dedication, heroism and hard work it displays (which are considerable), more than anything this is an image of people groping in the dark. After 150 years of hard work at perfecting settler culture, this is still at Day 1 of moving into the land.

What, then, would it be like to move into the land?

Peshastin Pinnacles

What is its story?



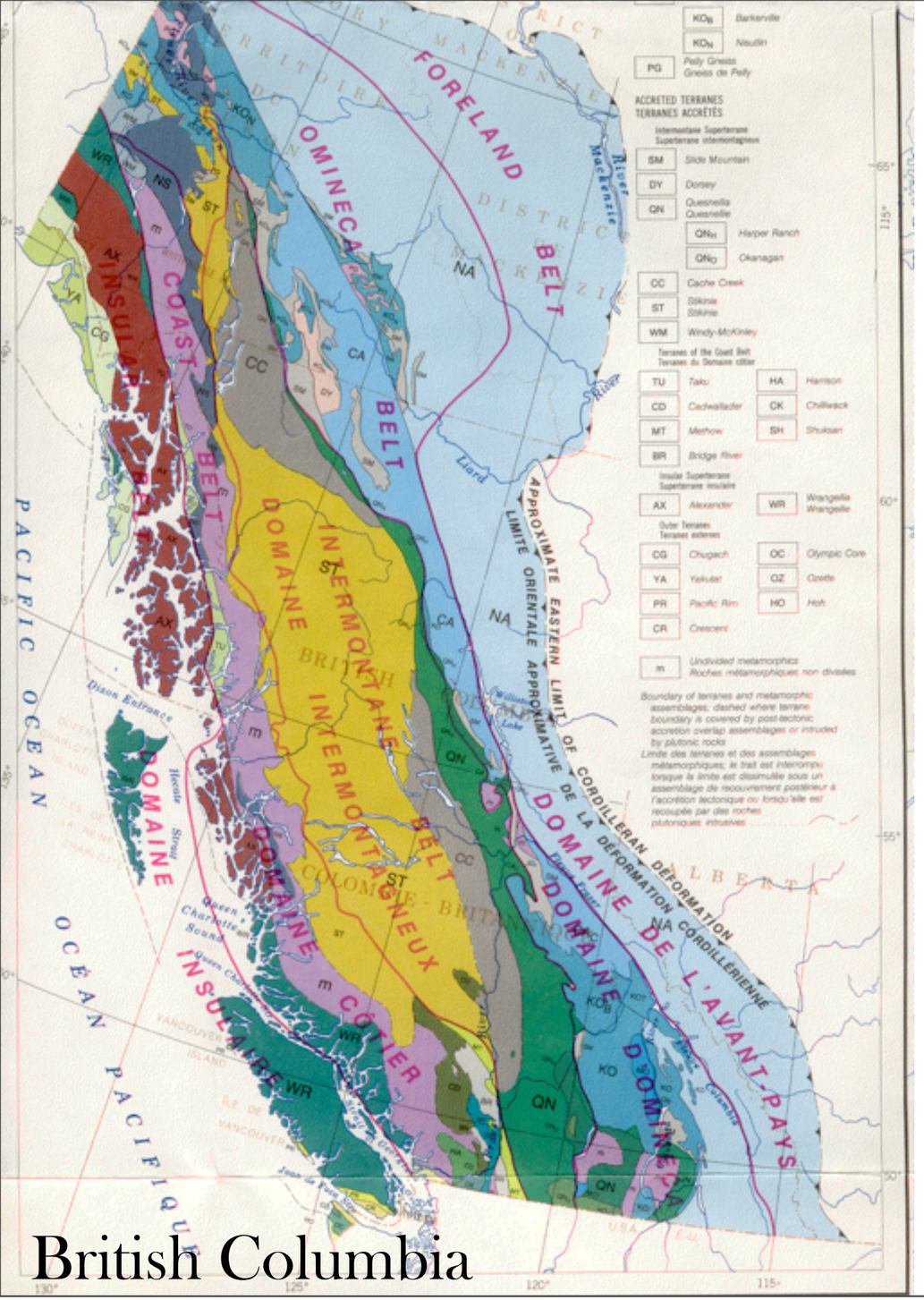
Peshastin Pinnacles

Conconully Reservoir

The lands stories are read and told and retold when people or water or fish move through them. Here, a wasp weaves through one of them, in the new story made of the old Sinlahekin grasslands. Most of all, this land is the story of pish, to use an old English word that became native to this place and binds the human stories of this land to the sea. The word is in the trade language, Chinook, that was once universal from California to Alaska, and, yes, it's fish. It's also a story of rock...

In the largest sense, the watershed of the Columbia River is this country. This is where the salmon come home. This is where they leave from. This is where they come back again. Or did. 30,000,000 of them, every year. Now the numbers are insignificant, except for the Okanagan, in British Columbia, where the country's edge has become its heart.

Columbia Country

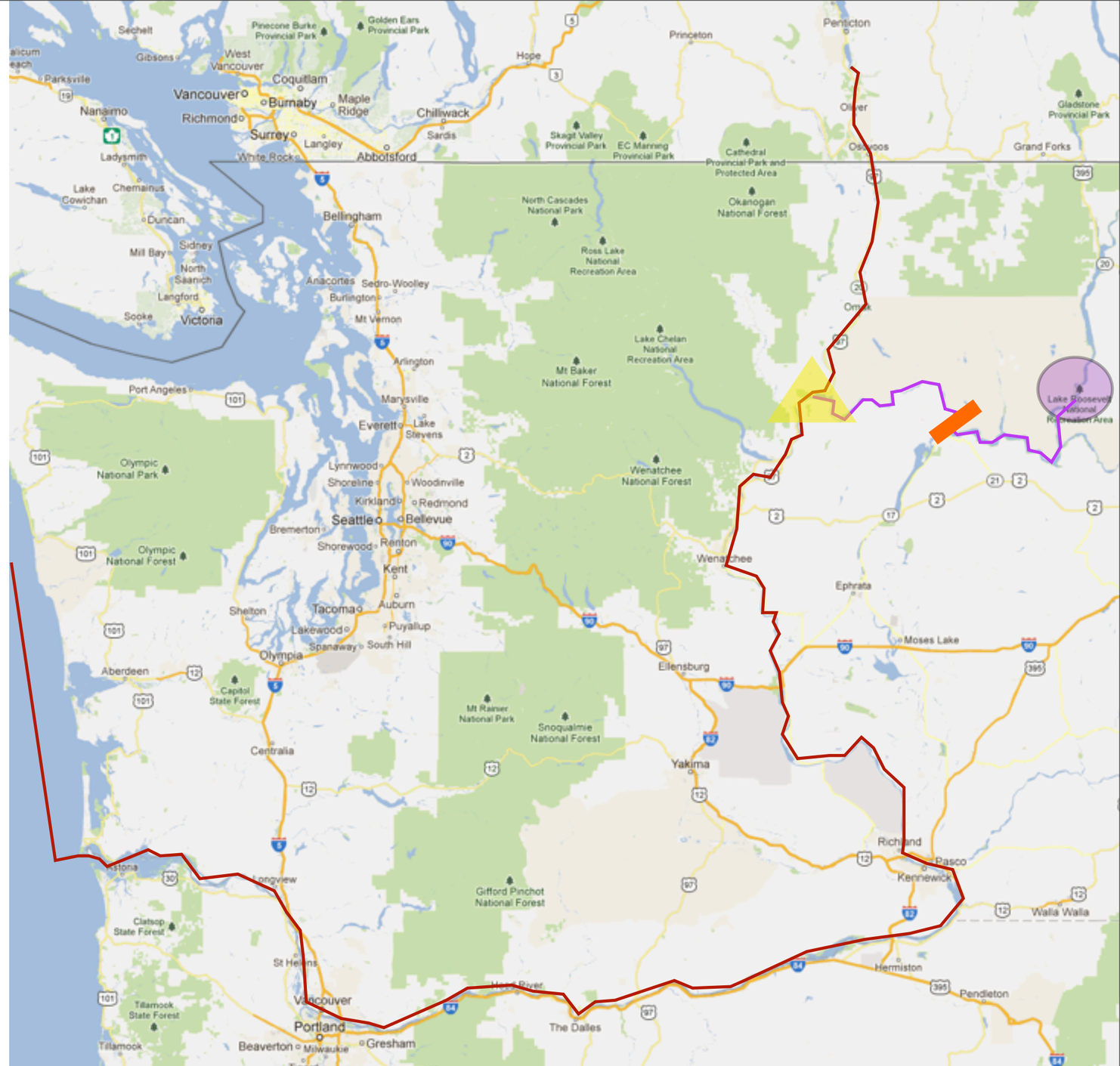


British Columbia

This map shows the different belts of rock that make up British Columbia, each completely distinct and without relationship with each other. The green belt in the centre of province is a land called Quesnelia. The Okanagan is in its south. The other lands that make up this region are The Foreland Belt, the Omenica Belt, the Intermontane Belt, the Coastal Belt, and the Insular Belt. Except for the Foreland Belt, each of them is a chain of volcanic island which originated in the Western Pacific, in the area of Japan. One by one, they moved with the earth's plates across the sea and collided with North America, erupting in violent volcanic collisions and raising the Foreland Belt into the sky. The salmon of the Okanagan ...

... travel from Siberia, where they spend two years swimming in schools of Siberian salmon, before gathering in their own schools again and swimming to the Columbia River at Astoria, Oregon. This route takes them from the original site of the Okanagan, off the Coast of Asia, to its current site, in North America. These fish might travel halfway across the world, but, really, they are just staying home. From Astoria...

...the salmon swim up the Columbia, over nine main stem dams, before turning north at Brewster (the yellow triangle to the right), and following the Okanagan River north through its slow oxbows to Osoyoos Lake. They then get over the dam at Oroville, at the south end of the lake, where their greatest hazards awaits, the nearly toxic, warm, low-oxygen waters of Osoyoos Lake, where three years earlier they had spent their first year, growing large enough to go to sea. Those that make it through that peril head north over the dredged channel and the irrigation weirs, until they arrive at the clean gravel of Nk'mip — now the greatest Indigenous fishing site on the Columbia. The orange bar is Grand Coulee Dam. The purple circle is the old fishing site of Kettle Falls, which it blocks.



Kettle Falls used to be one of the two great fishing sites on the Columbia. People came from 500 miles or more to fish here.

Kettle Falls

Kettle Falls, 1900

Kettle Falls

On June 16, 1940, the people gathered at the falls to throw eagle down on the water. Traditionally a ceremony to commemorate the first salmon of the season and to calm the waters in order to ensure that many more would come, this time it was called “The Ceremony of Tears.” At that ceremony, 15,000 people gathered under the leadership of Jim James (pointing here) to say good-bye to the falls, the salmon, their culture, and all of history since the last ice age. Later that season, the falls were inundated by the waters backed up behind the newly-completed Grand Coulee Dam.

Grand Coulee Dam has managed to do the seemingly impossible: it has stopped a great river dead in its tracks. Only a little water gets past. The rest goes through the turbine houses to the left and right of the main wall of the dam and comes up from deep channels as a new river. The original plan for the dam was for a structure approximately the height of the turbine rooms on the right, to pump irrigation water into the Grand Coulee, the old ice age drainage channel the river cut when ice blocked it at this point. The water was to be used to irrigate the Columbia Basin, in order to place 150,000 farm families on the land. Under political pressure, electrical capacity was added and the dam was built to its present height. The salmon were sacrificed.

Grand Coulee Dam

The dam, however, as well as the ten other dams on the American Columbia,, have been hard on the fish. The engineers who built the dams were confident that a 10% loss of young salmon as they passed through the turbines was an acceptable loss, but forgot to calculate that 10% multiplied by 10 dams was pretty much every fish going. Here at Bonneville Dam in the Columbia Gorge, a group of Native Americans are fishing in an effort to fulfill their treaty rights. That is because a treaty signed ...

...here in 1855, granting Native Americans the right to fish as they have done for 15,000 years, in their traditional locations, by their traditional methods, has proven to be the tightest treaty ever signed by the American government. This is The Lone Pine Fishing Station facing down the Dalles Dam, which floods Celilo Falls, the other great fishing hole on the Columbia. The Syilx of the Okanagan came this far south (the current Oregon-Washington Border) to fish and to trade. To date, more money has been spent trying to sustain the salmon fishery, to meet the obligations of that 1855 treaty than has ever been earned by hydroelectric generation on the river.

Here are the fish that have come home after a year in the deadly waters of Osoyoos Lake, then a fast trip down the Okanagan, then a series of interventions (because of turbine damage, the smolts are trucked around the upper dams on the Columbia and barged through the rest down to the sea), then a long trip to Siberia and back, then climbing up fish ladders over nine huge dams, then the dam at Oroville, then death by the thousands in the toxic waters of Osoyoos Lake, then a leap over the dam at McIntyre Bluff, and here they are, at the ancient Syilx fishing station at Okanagan Falls, where ...


...their story ends.
Okanagan Falls

It would take a couple days to build a fish ladder for the salmon, so they could get out into the cold, clear waters of Skaha Lake, to fulfil the promise of this Syilx statue in Okanagan Falls, but ...

... once they get there, there is nowhere to spawn anymore. Humans have siphoned off all the water.

Okanagan Falls

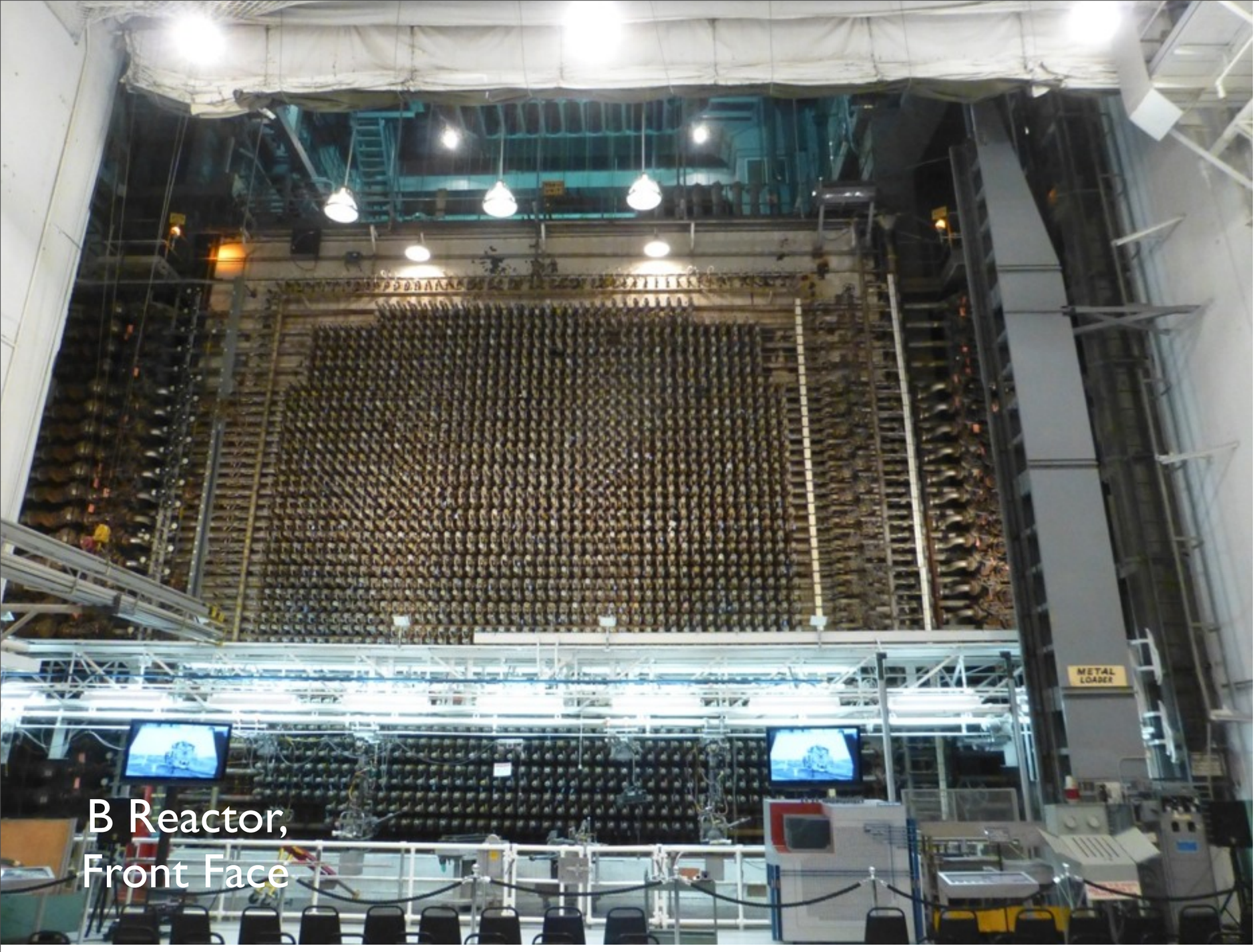
What's more, these men waded across the river from the Provincial Campground ($21 a night) that has replaced the ancient Syilx camp below the falls, and then scuttled across a fence to get here and poach some fish. A Syilx elder up for the day to watch the fish come home came up to me and pointed across the river and asked, "Do they have a license for that?", and I, who knew as well as he did that he had a legal right to those fish but I did not, said, "No. No-one can get a license to touch these fish." "That's what I thought," he said. It's about respect.

Those Syilx salmon have passed through this water, the only un-dammed non-tidal section of the American Columbia. On these shores, the plutonium for the Trinity Test and the Nagasaki Bomb, as well as 65% of U.S. Cold War nuclear arsenal, were manufactured.

The 640 square miles of the Hanford Engineer Works dominate this land, physically, culturally, politically, and economically. Here are some of the fruit trees left to die when the US Army cleared out the fruit growers of Hanford in 1943, to make room for the reactors. Current plans for the site include a $15 billion dollar cleanup (but not the most toxic area; that's just unreclaimable), and then planting this land, in between the area's nine mothballed reactors, with agricultural crops.

This is B Reactor, the world's first nuclear reactor. Some of the engineers who built this went on to build the dams on the Columbia, for something to do.

B Reactor



B Reactor,
Front Face

The 2004 process tubes of B reactor were each cooled by massive volumes of high pressure Columbia River water. The radioactive water that came out a second later from the back face of the reactor was (usually) stored in holding ponds for a day, to allow short-lived radioactive isotopes to decay, and then was returned to the river. At the height of the Cold War, the nine reactors of Hanford succeeded in raising the temperature of the entire river one degree.

Out on the river, things are still surreal. In front of two mothballed reactors, these men are fishing for sturgeon, which they will spend an hour hauling off the bottom of the river, before cutting their hook from the row of other hooks in the fish's jaw and letting it go ... to catch it again. These prehistoric fish, that feed on the likely not so clean river bottom, are highly endangered. On the day this image was made, about 500 other fishermen were attempting to catch the few thousand salmon that still spawn in this section of the river — the last salmon population still spawning in the river's main channel. Those fish are highly endangered as well. People, it seems, are set on catching the very last one.

Hanford Reach

Ironically, because of its long-standing high security classification, Hanford Reach is now the most pristine wildlife environment in Washington. This buck is swimming the river from an ancient Wapato village site to the reactors — a trip that he will make frequently, back and forth.

This young coyote watches our boat go past from the reactor shore.

High Country School

The ironies don't end with wildlife. This is the ruin of the High Country School, a one-room school that once served the farm families on the plateau west of Coulee City. The entire Columbia Basin was to be used to settle out of work American families, to instill in them the solid American values of land ownership and agricultural economy. When B Reactor's demands for electricity during World War II sidelined the irrigation efforts that were to support those family farms, the land fell almost exclusively into the hands of large, industrial farmers. When Banks Lake was finally filled in the Grand Coulee in 1951, the remaining water went to industrial farmers as well. Many of the farming communities that had established early on soon vanished. Today, the industrialists claim that their success is the result of good farming practices. They don't mention the billions of dollars of government subsidy, destined to help the poor, which lies behind their success.

Near Waterville

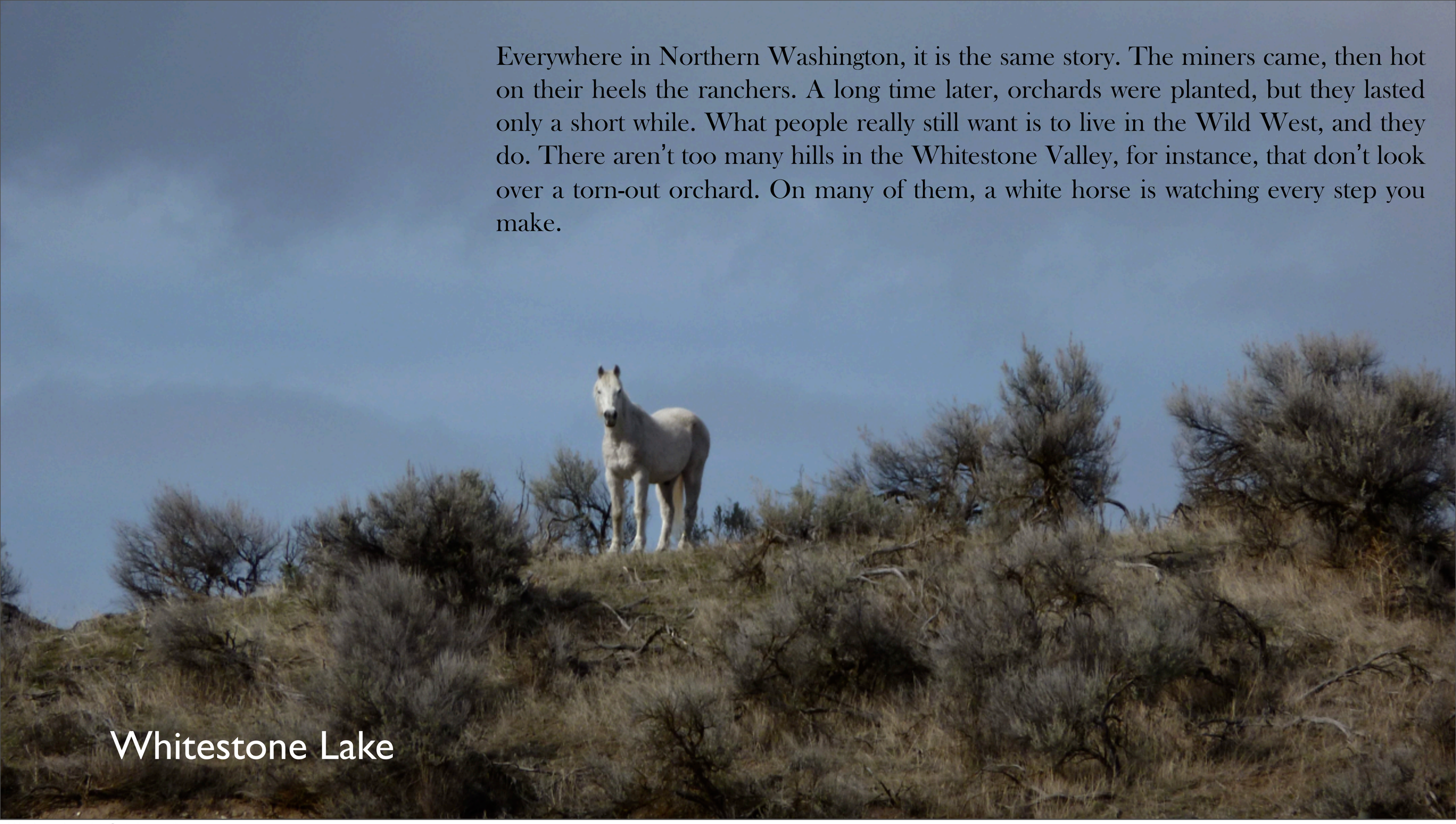
The war has been going on for a long time. This man, Kamiakin, was a close friend of the Okanagan's first missionary, Father Charles Pandosy, when both of them were young. Because of their friendship, Pandosy was able to counsel peace, through Kamiakin, to settle his restless braves long enough to allow the U.S. Army to extricate white settlers from Washington Territory without bloodshed. The war that soon followed, forced both of the peacemakers, Pandosy and Kamiakin, into exile — Pandosy because he had crossed over the line and befriended the Yakimas, rather than suppressing them, and Kamiakin because he would not fill the role that the US Army wished for him to fill — as a gifted orator who could, as a kind of proxy for their power, bring the independently-minded Yakima to what the Army saw as a reasonable peace. Time and time again, the US Army begged for Kamiakin to return to his country and lead his people once more. Time and time again, he refused.

Chief Kamiakin
(Yakima)

On these high grassland hills between the Yakima and Columbia rivers, Kamiakin's people kept their horses — the wealth of the Yakima people. Since they were the Yakima and were all this land, they had no need of fences. Accordingly, thousands of Yakima horses ran where they wished to run and were gathered up when required. White settlers saw only wild horses, and gathered them all up. Typically, such native bands of horses were shot and ground up into dogfood to be sold in the East.

By the 1970s, when my father had a cherry orchard on the old Kiona Ranch at the foot of the Horse Heaven Hills, red delicious orchards were planted everywhere, on sand irrigated with Canadian water, pumped into Banks Lake from Grand Coulee Dam, but some things aren't meant to be. Here's one of those red delicious orchards, now supporting a herd of horses.

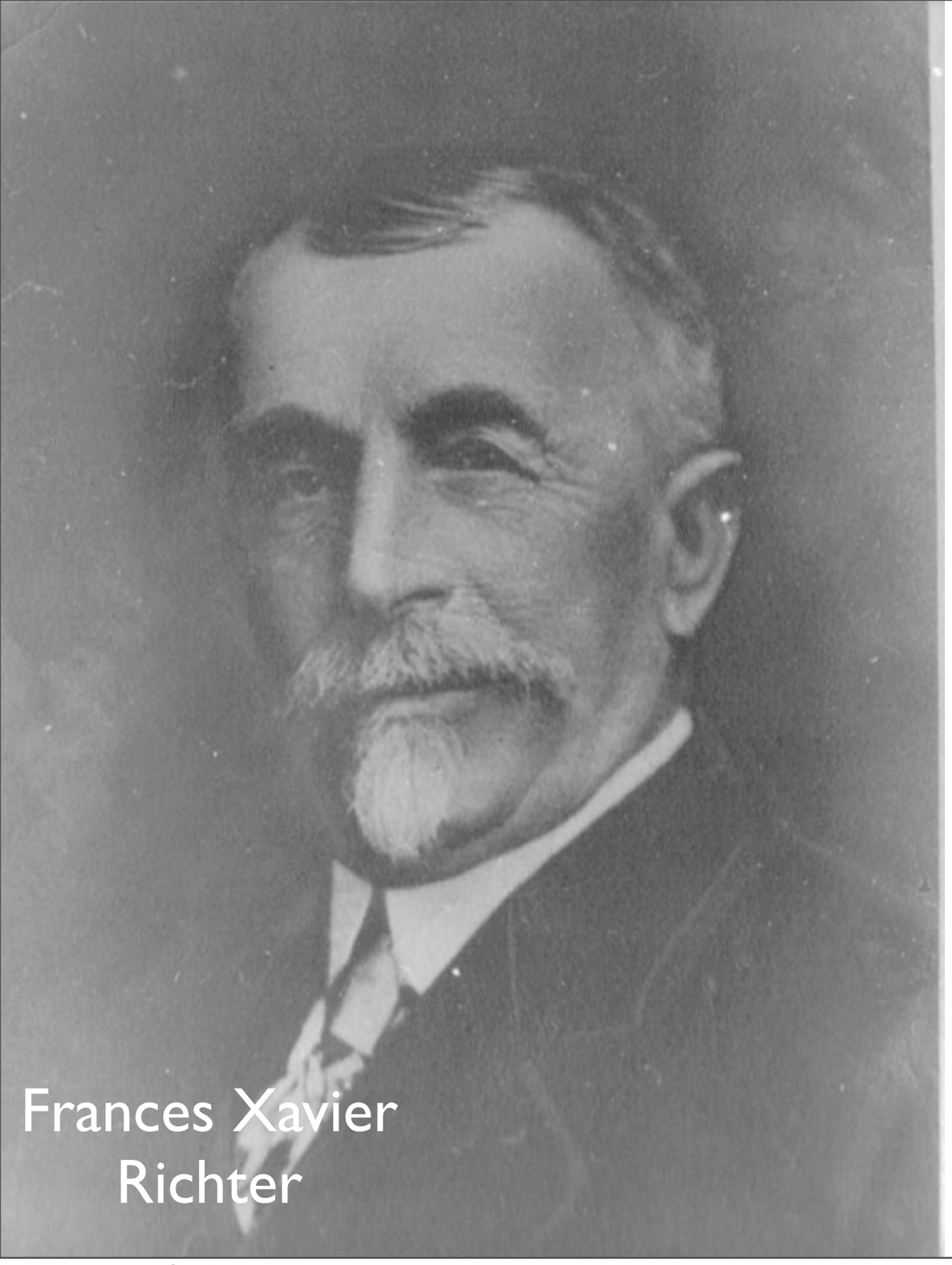
Everywhere in Northern Washington, it is the same story. The miners came, then hot on their heels the ranchers. A long time later, orchards were planted, but they lasted only a short while. What people really still want is to live in the Wild West, and they do. There aren't too many hills in the Whitestone Valley, for instance, that don't look over a torn-out orchard. On many of them, a white horse is watching every step you make.



Whitestone Lake

In nearby Loomis, this land, briefly an orchard (and a marginal one, as shown by the wind machine to drive out frost from trees with poor air drainage), is now the local fire hall. In a war, some people don't win.

Whitestone Lake



Frances Xavier Richter

This man is at the centre of our story. He knew about war. He knew how to conduct it and how to get out of its way. He was Kamiakin's friend. He was Pandosy's friend and parishioner. He came from an upper middle class family on the Czech-Polish border in Austro-Hungary, was wounded and captured as a scout in the Apache war, booted around the West from gold claim to gold claim for years, and as soon as the border was slapped down between American and British territory, moved north with his Syilx wife, Lucy Simla, his Swiss partner, and 62 head of cattle. He preempted land in the Similkameen that had been set aside for the Similkameen Band, acted as the last local manager for the Hudson's Bay Company (on the edge of his future Inglewood Ranch), and became a dominant cattleman and one of the founding entrepreneurs of British Columbia. Kamiakin said that he was one White man who was a real human being and could be trusted. Kamiakin came to Cawston, in the Similkameen, to visit his friend.

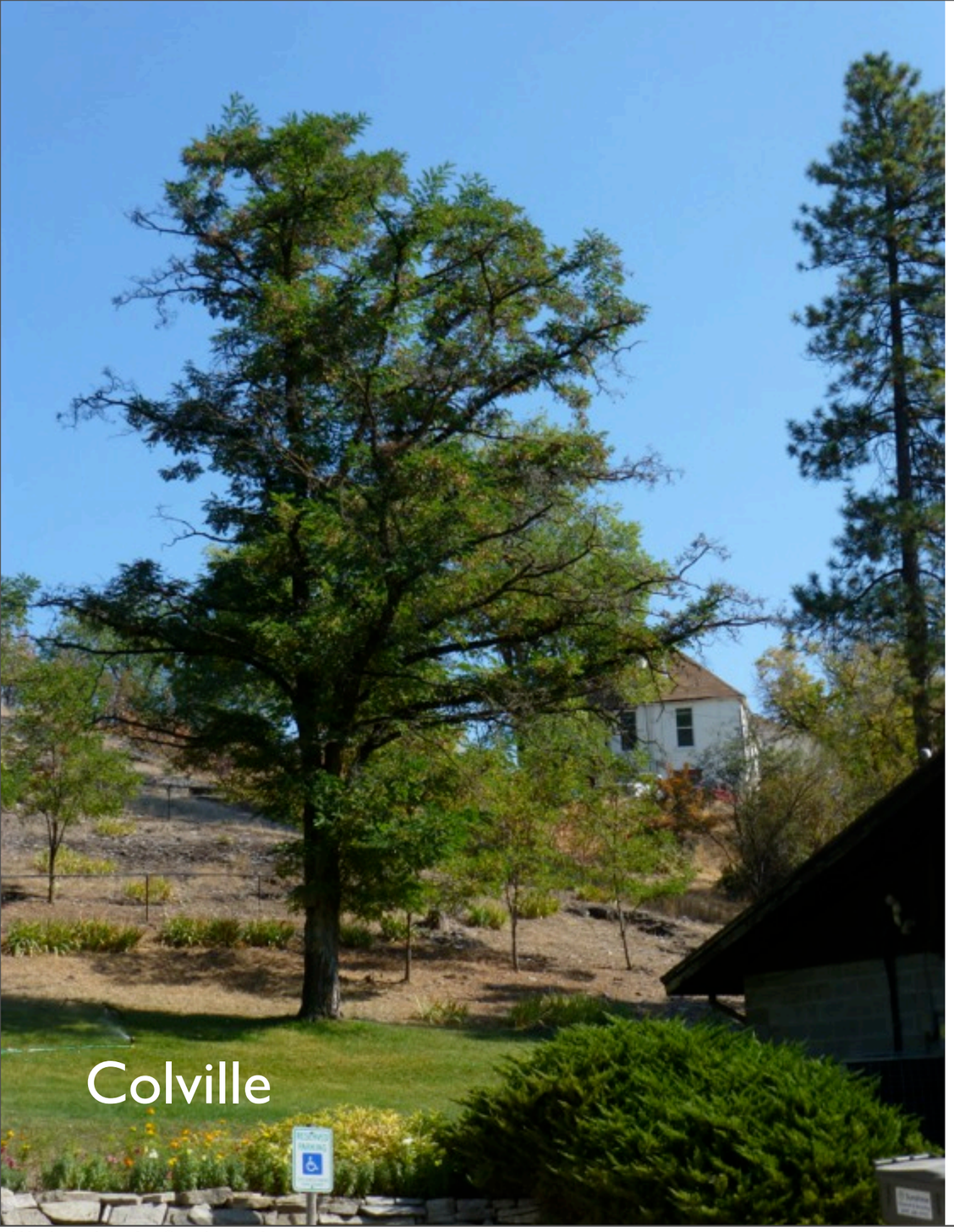
Did you catch the smoking gun there? Richter had a Syilx wife, yet preempted land that had been set aside for the Similkameen Band. Such land deals were illegal, but were sanctioned by the government, nonetheless — not by the British Columbian colonial administration, but by the Canadian one that followed in 1871. Something is wrong (or at least incomplete) with this story.

One thing that fascinates me about Richter's story is his relationship to Rich Bar. There are, actually, two Rich Bars in Washington: a mining camp started by soldiers guarding the U.S. border surveyors on the Similkameen, about a mile south of Richter's eventual ranch in Canada, and a short-lived placer camp on the Columbia, just a handful of miles south of the mouth of the Okanagan River at Fort Okanagan. Popular histories place Richter on the Columbia, but the Similkameen makes more sense: he would have just hopped across the border, without ever leaving home, and his whole life was changed. The image to the right shows some old mine workings in Rich Bar.

Rich Bar (Similkameen)

Richter's first wife, Lucy Simla, came from the Sinlahekin. Richter raised a Similkameen boy as his son in Washington. Like Pandosy, Richter came to the Okanagan Okanogan from Fort Colville — the next spring, in fact. Richter's second wife came from Loomis, also in the Sinlahekin. He built this palatial Californian ranch house for her in Keremeos, in Canada, complete with a turret and a peacock mosaic in the Art Nouveau parlour. Notice the shade tree in front of the house (it was blown out by dynamite a year after this photo was taken) and then ...

... take a look at this one (on the right) in Colville, in a house built ten years after Richter's Inglewood. This is an American Basswood — very similar to the Linden trees that graced church yards back in Richter's native Middle Europe. What's more ...



...black locusts like this are the signature trees of Richter's old ranches in the Similkameen, just as they are here in Colville. In short, Richter's history was American, closely tied with American military history and the formation of that border that created the colonies of Washington and British Columbia out of Oregon Territory. The founding history of the Okanagan is in the United States, not in Eastern Canada. For example, compare the following two images ...

This is the American ideal of the Wild West: technologies of a certain period in time, preserved in a heritage site, so that contemporary citizens can see from where they've come. Thing is, though, the lumberyard crane in the background is still the Wild West. That's what it looks like. With a few adjustments for technology, that's what it looked like then.

Colville

Here's what it looks like in "Canada". This is the Gorman Brothers Sawmill in Westbank, in the heart of the Okanagan. Those are beetle-killed pines being stacked up for milling — ingrowth in the old Syilx grasslands and savannahs.

Westbank

Pandosy also left Fort Colville for the Okanagan, also in the company of Syilx people, in a time of great distrust.

Father Charles Pandosy

Like Richter, Pandosy was a European refugee in flight from the Indian Wars and determined to build his version of the West now that the US Army had theirs. Thisstatue erected in his honour at the Okanagan Mission site, looks as if he's just stepped out of the Lord of the Rings.

However, it wasn't the Okanagan that Pandosy loved. That was his first mission, the farm he carved out at the mouth of the Yakima River and which hangers-on of the US Army plowed under and burnt. This is what it looks like today. This is the Chamna Nature Preserve, a bit of land cleared of farms in 1943, to build the Hanford Site, later a passageway for sewage and various water works, and now a triumphant new ecosystem of weeds and rabbitbrush, squeezed between the looping freeway interchanges of the Hanford residential area and the Yakima River.

It's easy to see why Pandosy left his heart there.

Yakima Indian Reservation

This mural at the Catholic Church on the Yakima Reserve hints that later missionaries to the Yakimas shared Pandosy's sense of accommodation.

Judging by the decay here, the Yakimas appear to be as little interested in it as they were in Pandosy's time, when after seven years he had failed to convert anyone. His only convert in the end was Kamiakin, on his death bed, who acknowledged there the power of his old friend.

Kettle Falls

After the US Army expelled Pandosy, he went north to Fort Colville, at Kettle Falls. At the time, the heavily guarded fort, and the ranches stretching up the valley to Colville, was the only White settlement remaining in the territory. The Whites would have been considerably outnumbered by indigenous peoples. This is what the falls look like today.

Pandosy lived for three years on the edge of the Fort, at St. Paul's Mission. (The pine trees were not there at the time. This was grass.) Given that Richter left from Colville a year after Pandosy, given that he was a devout Catholic, and given that this would have been the only Catholic Church in the entire region, chances are that he met Pandosy here, before they both headed north. At any rate, in his later years Pandosy was a frequent guest at Inglewood, and Richter's métis sons from his first marriage — cowboys, all — served as apprentices at Okanagan Mission.

St. Paul's Mission

Okanagan Mission

In fact, although Pandosy is renowned for having started the first White settlement in the Okanagan, there is that little problem of the métis, because when Pandosy came the Syilx certainly weren't his parishioners. That would have been the french-speaking métis Hudsons Bay Company packers, also exiles from Oregon, who were living along the lake long before Pandosy arrived. In their thinking, and in their personal histories, they were about as White as Pandosy was, which is to say, not much. In fact, the whole White thing was a colonial codeword, for saying that the history of accommodation and intermarriage was over, and a new history was to begin. If it were only that simple.

Part of the myth of Father Pandosy is that he was the first man to see that with the application of water to the grasslands and shrub steppe the land could become a Garden of Eden. He is also renowned for starting the Okanagan's orchard industry and for teaching his parishioners to become farmers. This is the apple tree he planted from a seed he brought along from Fort Colville. In the same year he planted that seed, however, Hiram J. Smith planted an entire orchard in Oroville, still in the Okanogan Valley, just five miles south of the line drawn in the sand. Hiram wins. Sorry, Charles.

Father Pandosy's Apple Tree

Gold Pearmain apples (an old Bavarian variety) that my father, with the same myth of Eden in the desert, planted in 1963 on the old Barcelo Ranch, above Richter's first homestead in Cawston.

It was peaches that really got the White Eden myth cooking in the Okanagan. The boom started in 1898, when a prospector and a partner in the Canadian American Gold Mining Company, John Moore Robinson, prospecting at the base of the Hudson's Bay Company pack trail at Deep Creek, ate a peach from a lone tree on the Lambly Brothers' ranch on the Trepanier Creek Delta. He quickly purchased the ranch, called it "Peachland," and sold it as an agricultural paradise. Imagine, peaches, the fruit famous from Georgia, would grow here in the north! "Summerland" and "Naramata" soon followed. The "Okanagan" was born.

Bella Vista

Peaches and Red Delicious apples, sold from Starks' Brothers Nursery in St. Louis, Missouri, were the stock and trade of American settlement in the West. Kettle Falls was a promising peach growing area, as were many of the towns flooded by the Grand Coulee Dam. Peach history in North America goes back to Spanish missionaries in Florida, and then to the Cherokee people, who planted seeds wherever they stopped on their many journeys of tears. For many years, peaches remained a Native crop, farmed wild. They became a commercial crop when first the boll weevil and then the Civil War destroyed the cotton industry in the South. Peaches, sold in New York, soon filled the gap, and the race was on to expand production. Washington, fully opened only after the Civil War, and free of the civil strife of the war, was a prime planting ground for this post war, White, succesionist crop ... and so was the Okanagan.

The notion of the Okanagan as an agricultural paradise where people could come to be free of war continued for many decades. Here are my grandparents, Bruno (foreground) and Martha Leipe, sharecropping tomatoes in South Kelowna in 1929, for the Casorso family. As a communist, Bruno had been put on a Nazi death list back in Breslau (Wroclaw), back when politics was conducted by warring private street armies, and thought an adventure in Canada was prudent. The Depression hit that fall. Times became very, very tough. Bruno and Martha left the Okanagan, because crop prices were too low, lived out the Depression in the Fraser Valley, and finally moved North, again to escape war — this time the Russian Nuclear arsenal.

South Kelowna, 1929

Kobau Mountain

When the North had nearly killed Bruno, they moved back, rejoining their old communist friends in Penticton. Here they are with their dog Pootzie, around 1963, looking out over the grasslands of Kobau Mountain to Snowy Mountain and Chopaka. In Penticton, my mother married my father, who had survived the Nazi period in Germany and had come to the Okanagan to escape war forever. This image was made by the German-Italian photographer Hugo Redivo, in the style of photographs that he was used to taking in the Swiss Alps. And so, the myth of the wild and peaceful, uninhabited land, the clean slate on which European culture could write a new, peaceful, and fruitful version of itself expanded. No one noticed that these slopes were once a major fire-farming area for the Similkameen. To European eyes, they looked like cattle pastures, and that's what they became, for a long, long time.

To the Plateau people, who had lived here for a long, long time, this land was rich and fruitful.

At the northern edge of plateau culture, Okanagan Lake fills an ancient fault line for nearly a hundred miles. For most visitors, the land is so foreign that they do not see it as a human environment. They see the water, though, and jump in. The water, however, is an illusion. Only the top metre and a half of the lake is renewed each year, after spending ten months up on the hills. The rest is 10,000 years old. If you want to find the real water, look up.

Natural human attraction for water easily fooled early settlers, who developed extensive surface water schemes to deliver water to the ‘desert’. This is the dam that covers Coyote Rock, as well as the site of Okanogan City, on the Similkameen. 10,000 American miners who had wandered north from California once lined the banks for a few short miles here, before they burst across the border into British territory and the gold fields of the Cariboo.

Shanker’s Bend

Surface water thinking remains dominant today. This golf course above Okanagan Landing mines the surface water from a few grassland lakes and wetlands, uses them to sell houses to retirees from the Canadian Prairies, and then ...

instead of passing the water on to more organic life, as native plants do here, the water leaves the hillsides. Much of it chokes waste water systems intended to deliver it quickly to the lake.

Grey Trail

The water doesn't belong in the lake — at least not yet. It has a whole year to get through before it arrives there. When the land is cut, even on a bare, dry hillside, it quickly erupts into a wetland. In the case of this one, along an old irrigation canal above Okanagan Landing, the wetland that forms is high above the lake and grows weeds, before eventually evaporating.

Just around the corner, the land naturally concentrates water. This is a wild cherry grove, filled out with a few saskatoons and mock oranges, and even an apricot that has happily naturalized itself here — all growing without surface water. These individuals pass green water down the hill, month by month, individual by individual, species by species. When the members of the Penticton Indian Band were given apple trees to start a Western economy, they planted them along creek beds, where natural water would sustain them. White farmers shook their heads.

Bella Vista Hills

This is how water looks on the land: alive. These blue bunched wheatgrass individuals use their dead stalks to harvest rain and to draw it into their living hearts. Because the grasses are drawing in water from an area larger than their living bodies, they are able to thrive in drought conditions. Tiny water collection technologies are possible, on this model, which could support many other crops on these same hills.

If the myth of an Eden in the Desert is maintained and continues to mine surface water in the high country and deliver it in the valley bottoms without supporting life along the way, water will be in increasingly short supply. To manage it, civic governments throughout the valley advocate xeriscaping, which is often so misinterpreted that it creates true deserts, although naturally there never was one in this valley, except in tiny microclimates here and there.

Okanagan Landing

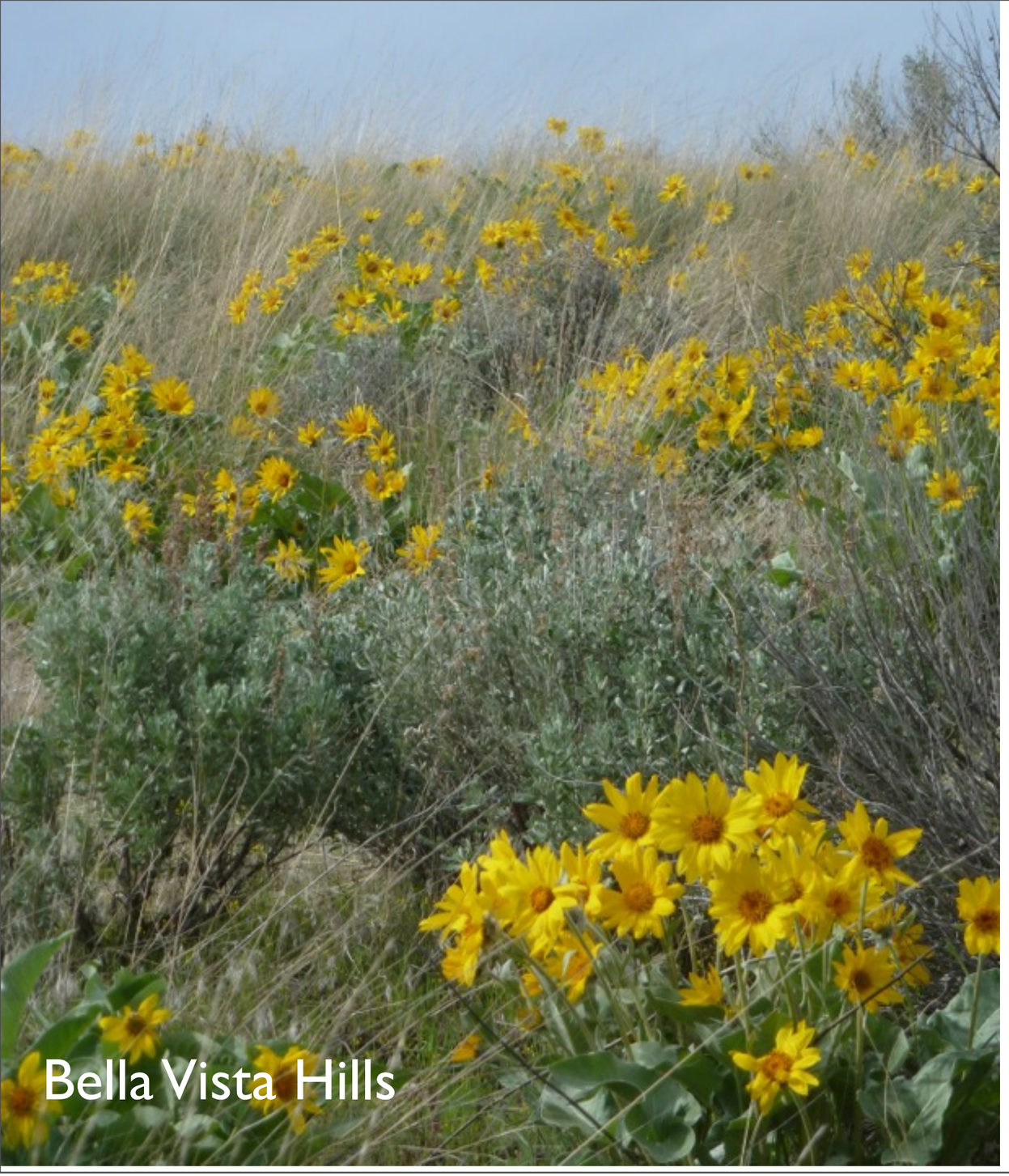
Okanagan Landing

When Adam and Eve left the garden, they wandered in a wasteland of weeds. Weeds like this. This is red root pigweed, growing on a cheatgrass hillside. Vegetable growers have been tearing this stuff out for a century, yet wherever the land is broken it shows up to heal it. It is actually only a White story that calls this a weed. Pigweed was one of the staples of Indigenous North American Culture. Along with lambs' quarters (a similar weed today), it was harvested for green leaves in the early spring, and then again in the fall for seeds, which provided important dietary starch. These plants need no water at all. Alternate crops, along this model, that take the pressure off of surface water systems, can mean that the story of agricultural bounty in the Okanagan need no longer be tied to ever-diminishing reserves of surface water, which could be better deployed returning productivity to the land.

The ground cover between these vines is a self-selected collection of native flowers from the hillsides. In effect, two water regimes coexist on this plot. They could easily be two crop regimes as well, productively marrying settler and Indigenous water management worlds.

After all, this abandoned vineyard on Father Pandosy's original mission site, does just fine without water, or posts and wires. Some of the plants in this plantation had productive crops of big, juicy berries.

This Indigenous garden at Celilo Falls has survived, untended, for 150 years, next to a village site that saw an annual influx of 50,000 people.



Even after ninety years of neglect, the old Syilx gardens of the Bella Vista Hills remain productive. This is arrow-leafed balsam root, a staple of Sylix food and medicinal fire gardening. All parts of this sturdy and beautiful plant were used, at various times during the year.

Biscuit root, such as these individuals growing on the shady side of Turtle Mountain in Vernon, were pounded into flour and baked into flatbread. Fried Bread and Bannock, which became staples of Indigenous cooking, were substitutes for this natural flour.

There is no part of this land that is not rich with water. Even this dry, soil-less rocks are productive in the wet season of February and March. There is lots of water here. It is everywhere and nowhere at the same time — everywhere in life, but nowhere blue and sparkling.

This image illustrates the state of the land today. Water diverted through houses and then through a purification plant is used to irrigate land called The Commonage, which was stolen from the Syilx 120 years ago. It has been in land claim since 1895. Much of the water sprayed here to grow forage for cattle evaporates and is lost to the land. Wherever one stands, politically, in that story, several things are clear: 1. Irrigating Indigenous land with sewage, whether it is treated or not, is not respectful. 2. Evaporating precious water into the air is wasteful. 3. This is the only planet we have.

Okanagan Landing

The idea of Private Property is central to social organization in settler culture. At heart, though, there is no private property, because it is not possible to own land, or the sun or the rain or the wind. What is owned is a social right, much like a patent, granted to an individual owner by the government. It is a license to improve the land and use it for personal and public enrichment, free of interference from others.

It is, however, not a master-slave relationship, in which the owner can do whatever he wants, even trash it like this. No one has that right, and no government can grant it.

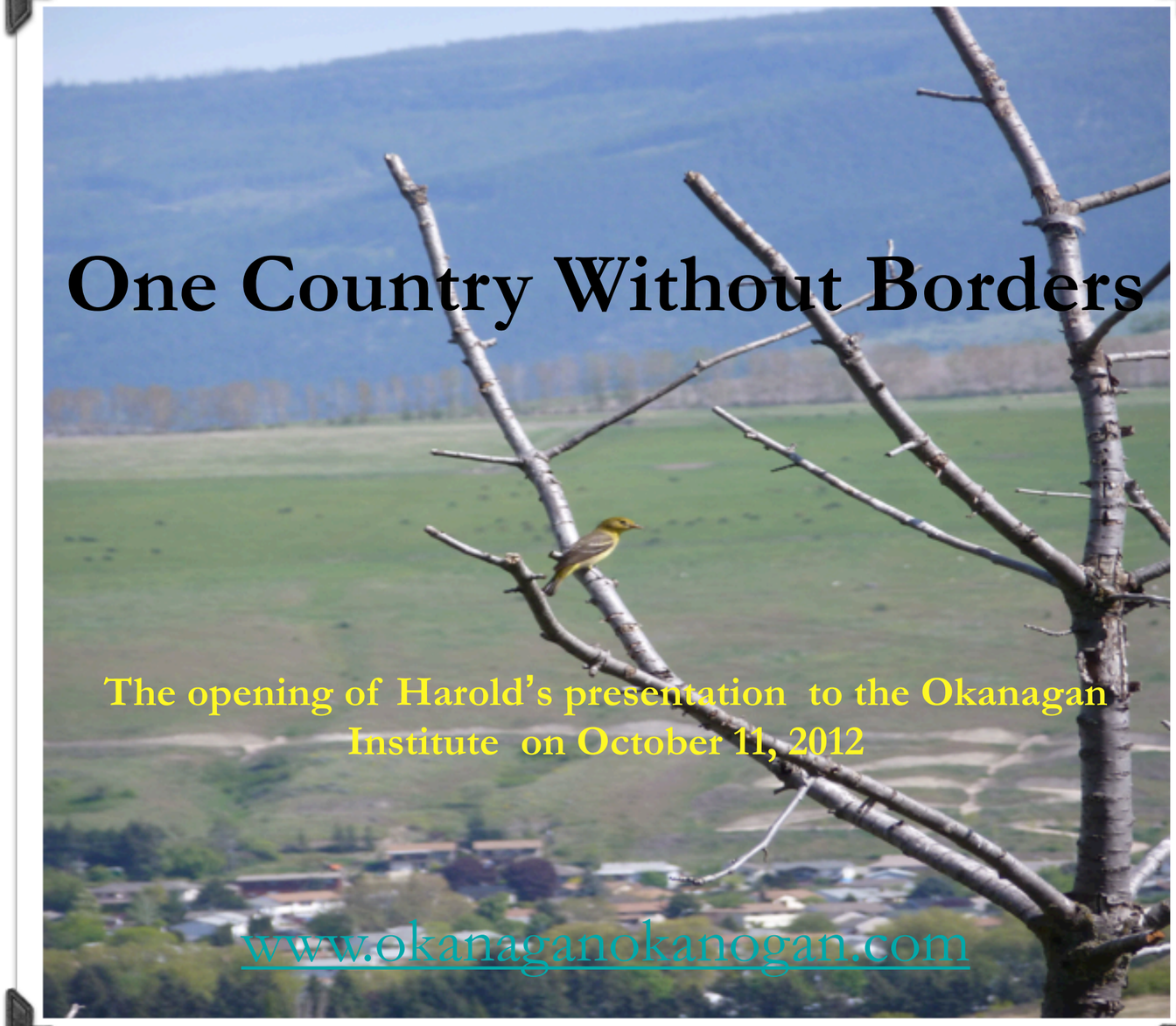
If we can rebuild Indigenous methods of farming which use the natural, green water processes of the hillsides, where almost all of the water is, we can take pressure off of the blue water systems that pump water out of high country lakes and deep wells, freeing up water for the salmon. If we can bring the salmon home again, we will know that we will be able to survive here for a long time — physically and spiritually.

In the future, a farm might look like this. This young elderberry bush in my garden produced 250 clusters like this last spring, a crop which fetches very high prices in top end restaurants. Elderberries grow very well in this climate, without irrigation.

Spaghetti sauce in the making. All ingredients are from my garden, including a cluster of grapes for the cook's pleasure.

During the next year, I will be expanding this project into two books: “Atomic Okanagan”, which will lay the roots of Okanagan culture at the feet of the Grand Coulee Dam and B Reactor at Hanford; and “Water Farming”, a work outlining new technologies and crops for working with the landscape to capture, store and move energy through the land, into society, and back out of it again. Stay tuned. Oh, one last thing. The ants to the right are farming aphids on sagebrush — a process much like the collection of maple syrup. We’ll be talking about that.

Okanagan Landing


One Country Without Borders
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