

SHOSHONE-BANNOCK KEEPERS OF THE EARTH - 1991

PODCAST REDUX - 2024

INTRO: WELCOME TO VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH, A PODCAST SERIES FROM THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. I'M JANE FRITZ.

BACK IN 1991, I PRODUCED A FIVE-PART SERIES OF DOCUMENTARIES FOR SPOKANE PUBLIC RADIO. CALLED KEEPERS OF THE EARTH, THE PROGRAMS FEATURED STORIES OF EACH OF THE IDAHO TRIBES SET WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR HISTORIES, CULTURES AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NATURAL WORLD.

THESE MANY YEARS LATER, THE VOICES OF THE STORYTELLERS AND INDIGENOUS LEADERS ARE MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER. WE INVITE YOU NOW TO LISTEN AND LEARN FROM THE NATIVE PEOPLES, WHOSE VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES CREATE A FUTURE THAT WE ALL CAN EMBRACE.

[SOUND OF RIVER FLOWING, FADE UNDER]

NARRATOR: In the very heart of Idaho wilderness beneath its most spectacular mountain range, the Sawtooths, springs forth a river like no other river. The Salmon. It carves its way through rocky canyons for hundreds of miles. It is home to spawning steelhead and chinook salmon that journey from the sea. Indian people have always fished these waters and they hunted the wild sheep that live among the rocky crags. Lemhi Shoshone people. Keepers of the Earth.

[FLUTE MUSIC AS SEGUE ALONG WITH RIVER SOUND, FADE UNDER]

There are stories at the Lemhi Shoshone of how a young woman of the tribe, Sacajawea, safely led through her native land two explorers named Lewis and Clark, and there are stories they tell of how the Lemhi Shoshone lost their homeland in the early part of this century, like many great fish plucked from the

rivers. They were removed to the Fort Hall Reservation. Now present day Pocatello. To learn farming and ranching in the desert. There, the people joined related bands of Shoshone Indians and Bannock — two nomadic tribes that lived in a territory that originally encompassed portions of six states.

Emaline George is a descendant of the Lemhi Shoshone bands now living at Fort Hall. She is a member of the Land Use Commission, the administrative body that oversees natural resource management and environmental protection of reservation land and water. She comments on the traditional Indian stories.

EMALINE GEORGE: We chuckle about them, but yes, there's a lot of why we're here, and why we survived the annihilation concept of the government and Cavalry, and why do we exist? Yes, because we're Earth people; we were formed from the Earth and we will survive because of that. We're in everything.

Everybody calls it stories or mythology or whatever they want to call it. But there's a lot of meaning to it. There's a lot of value to it, to us and for each plant, whether it be weeds, whether it be the trees, whether it be the water, the various seasons, every part of that has Spirit to us. We had to put humor into it because that's part of us. And that's, that's the only way that we have survived as long as we have.

Those are our traditional keepers of the earth, what you're talking about. We have our water people. We have our ground people. There are sky people. And they're all meaningful. And we know they're there and they protect things for us. And that's why there's prayers, there's the seasonal prayers. Constantly, always. And it never ends.

NARRATOR: Emma Pohipe Dann is another descendant of the Lemhi Shoshone, sometimes referred to as Sheepeaters. An elder of her tribe, Emma says a story always teaches a lesson. And that it's important to give something back to the Great Spirit for the gift of a story. She, too, does this through prayer.

EMMA DANN: Your everyday lessons are what you learn to do with the Earth, every day. Every day you get up, you have to give the Creator a thank you for the Earth. Because that's what you are. You can't say, 'Bless me and I thank you for me.' We don't see it that way. You can stand barefoot on Mother Earth and give thanks to it, every day. And thanks for the water. That's what I was told.

NARRATOR: Native American spirituality is linked to the stories. Cultural anthropologist Rodney Frey.

RODNEY FREY: I think that one thing that's helped me as an anthropologist understand this spirituality is to acknowledge, first of all, that the stories are not to be taken literally, but are metaphors of something. They are symbolic of something. And what that something is refers to a large extent for me to that world of the spiritual. If we understand they're symbolic, metaphoric meanings, we enter into a world of the transcendence of the spiritual itself in which these relationships are also pointed to significances of a spiritual nature; forces beyond the overt material forces at work.

[SEGUE INTO SOUND OF RIVER FLOWING AND FADE UNDER]

NARRATOR: Ramona Walema is a storyteller. She is Bannock and speaks her native language fluently. Her father was a medicine man among the people. As a small child growing up with her father's stories, she learned the spiritual ways of the Indian and gained knowledge about the native plants.

[SPEAKING FIRST IN HER NATIVE TONGUE AND CROSS-FADED WITH RIVER SOUND AND THEN FADE UNDER.]

RAMONA WALEMA: Long time ago the Animals, they were people. They spoke the Bannock language. There happened to be a Chipmunk that was the head of the tribe. And the Chipmunk knew that there was starvation. People were dying of starvation. So he had to do something quickly or all the people will die. So he tells

the Mouse to go and announce that there's gonna be a dance. This dance is going to be a very special dance and it's going to be a religious dance, a spiritual dance. So it was very important. So the Mouse went out, and says, 'Hear ye, come out. tonight, we're going to have a big dance. Everybody's going to dance. Even the little ones and the grandpas and the grandmothers, we're all gonna dance tonight.'" So they all came out. And the Chipmunk didn't want to dance. He said, my toenails are too long. I can't dance. So they begged him because he was a leader at that time. They begged him to dance. So he just made up his mind that he was going to dance. So they danced all night. The Chipmunk danced with his long toenails. So he made lines in the ground and the Earth just like a plow.

So he called on the Four Winds and they prayed and they drummed. They sang spiritual songs. And then the winds started to blow. Then the Four Winds blew. And where the Squirrel danced, it blew the seeds into the tracks. And that's when the mustard seeds began to grow. And the next morning and the next day, there were mustard seed plants all over and they gathered. They had a feast with the mustard seeds. You can make pudding, bake it into bread. And it's kind of used by the medicine man also when he's doctoring somebody. He asks for a bowl of mustard seeds. The night the Chipmunk danced, his people lived.

[SHE CONTINUES SPEAKING IN HER NATIVE TONGUE AND CROSS-FADES WITH RIVER SOUND AND FADES UNDER]

NARRATOR: The respect for and connection to the Earth is still strong among Shoshone-Bannock tribal members, even though they had to give up their nomadic ways for reservation life to survive. But they have done their best in this process of acculturation to maintain their Indian values. Emaline George:

GEORGE: We were never used to fences back in the history of our people. You don't fence anywhere. You don't claim a parcel or land. You share it. That's why they were nomadic. And I think that was one of the changes that took place here,

is that we had boundaries. And that's one of the things that was very difficult for our people to understand.

GEORGE: But regardless of those, then we go back to our 1868 Treaty, you know, why they were placed here; in treaty territory was agreed that you know, we'd always have our hunting and fishing always; those rights would never be taken away from us. And that's why our ancestors went and placed their thumbprints on those negotiations that took place to be placed on a reservation. And to no longer be the nomadic people. So they gave a lot; they consented to this. And that was a lot to give up for just a small reservation on which we exist now.

When you take that into consideration, it's really difficult to say that, you know, how do we manage our lands today as our ancestors were used to? I can't say that we have, because our ancestral heritage, our ancestors, had so much, you know, in comparison to what we have today and the changes that, you know, that we were made to adapt to. We don't have what we had then.

NARRATOR: Part of the Fort Hall Reservation, referred to as the Bottoms, is an area near the confluence of the Portneuf and Blackfoot rivers. These grassy bottom lands were the ancient wintering grounds of the Shoshone-Bannock people in the heart of their homeland. Once a favorite gathering and camping place for the Indian people, it is now shared by a large herd of Buffalo, fenced hayfields, and non-Indian game bird hunters and fishermen. The Land Use Commissioners consider their role in the management of the Bottoms. Emaline George:

GEORGE: The management, we're trying to achieve here in those areas like in the Bottoms, mainly, because of the various uses. It's been difficult, and not only that, no one on this Reservation is set aside. You know, we're told it was set aside for the Shoshone-Bannock tribal membership. And now, you know, for other people that live here and use those because they pay, you know, for permits to go down there fishing. It's really hard to share that.

GEORGE: And it's really hard to understand, you know, why we don't have the peace, that we don't have the abundance of wildlife, and we don't have that freedom to be in those areas, you know, where you could at one time, you know, just go down and maybe horseback and just ride all over or maybe just be content, you know, with families down there. Because now we have the buffalo down there, which is new and that's a buffalo enterprise. Now we have fences down there. You know, that's for hay meadows. And, you know, we're wondering, you know, who's trespassing and the new laws that really make it difficult, you know, to live the way that we were used to be, even in the early 1900s.

NARRATOR: The Fort Hall Reservation became the permanent homeland of the Shoshone-Bannock people. But in order to ensure Indian self-sufficiency, their traditional pursuits of hunting, fishing and gathering needed to be augmented by more modern pursuits of agriculture and industry. What appeared to be the least desirable land to live on turned out to be the most productive mineable phosphate reserves in North America. For 40 years, the Reservation has experienced the open pit mining of 60 million tons of high grade ore by Simplot and FMC Corporations, as well as a phosphorus processing plant run by FMC. The largest operation of its kind in the world. Revenues from land leases and royalties on ore tonnage have provided the tribes with necessary income and employment. But now the Gay Mine is closing due to dwindling reserves. By 1995, all operations will have ceased. The news of the mine's closure took the tribes by surprise. With only one third of the mining pits presently reclaimed, the tribes could be left with devastated lands once the corporations move elsewhere.

[BRING UP FLUTE AND DRUMMING MUSIC AS SEGUE AND FADE UNDER AND OUT]

Farming is another way the land has changed. One-fifth of the Reservation is agricultural and will probably stay that way as long as the land is irrigable it provides revenue. In fact, the Fort Hall Reservation is some of the most productive

land around; 20 percent of Idaho's potatoes are grown there. But most of the farmers are non-Indians leasing farmlands from tribal members. Land Use Commissioner Genevieve Edmo:

GENEVIEVE EDMO: If an Indian decided to farm some land, he's going to have to go into debt to do it. He doesn't have the money to go into a big farming operation where he's going to make any money out of it unless he goes into a big operation. If an Indian does go into that, then he would try to take care of the land as best as he could by keeping the weeds out. And, you know, maybe going back to the old way of farming practices that they used to have here, he'd have to be knowledgeable about all these chemicals and everything. And if he's not knowledgeable of all those chemicals and stuff, he's not going to use them. The use of chemicals all over, they've killed a lot of their natural foods and stuff that was gathered way many, many years ago before the white man ever came here. So those things are gone. We could never go back to that and we could never restore anything back to what it was before, because some of those things are gone completely.

NARRATOR: It is the natural vegetation, the rangelands that the Land Use Commission feels compelled to protect. Again, Genevieve Edmo:

EDMO: There is the conflict between what we would like to see preserved and kept in its natural state, because you would call it an economic conflict, because the land that is not tribal and the land that is allotted or inherited lands. Okay, the people need money. They need to survive. And so they're willing to lease their lands out to people who are willing to pay the rent that they want for it. And farm the land or use the land for other purposes. The biggest conflict we have is with our rangelands. A lot of our rangeland is being plowed under for dry farming.

NARRATOR: Because the Bureau of Indian Affairs plays the role of trustee for the tribes, another level of conflict exists. Genevieve Edmo:

EDMO: The Bureau of Indian Affairs' concept is that their goal is to get the best and highest use of the land for the people, for the landowners. Okay. And we have a conflict with them saying that, hey, we want to keep our rangelands as it is because a lot of the dry farmers plowed up, get rid of the natural vegetation and then they go broke and they leave it and all our topsoil is blowing away and there's no more natural vegetation there. They don't restore it to its original state or try to restore it to its original state. They don't reclaim it. That's part of the conflict that we have with the trying to keep the Reservation in its original state.

What I don't like to see is the land broken up and left neglected. When I was growing up, I was taught that you respected the Earth because the Earth provided you with your livelihood and could protect you also if it came down to it. And the way that water is sometime is misused. Well, in this department, you know, you have the opportunity to voice your opinions or voice your disagreements and try to have a say in how to better take care or better utilize what we have without destroying or abusing. When they first started to tear down all the brush in the cedars that was in the area, I really felt sad because to me and to some of the elders that, you know, hated to see that happen was that they more or less stated that we're going to lose our rain. That's what brings the rain. Now that all those cedars and all those tall brush and sometimes those sagebrush stood as tall as a house, but that the older people say that that's what brings the rain. We're not going to see as much rain as we used to. That has happened. You notice when the rains come or when the storm clouds gather, they seem to split and go around us. They go down south of us and up north of us. And, you know, that bothers me. And we just seem to be drying up.

[BRING UP FLUTE MUSIC AS SEGUE AND FADE UNDER AND OUT]

NARRATOR: Kesley Edmo, chairman of the Fort Hall Business Council, expresses his concerns about the changes in the natural world around him.

KESLEY EDMO: More along for our own reservation in regard to natural resources, they're not being handled too well because all they've got to do is take a look at the Reservation. Indian people themselves, according to tradition, you know, they were always in favor of having the land the way it was, you know. They didn't believe in doing away with all the watersheds and doing away with this and doing away with that, because they had good foresight. What would happen, you know, in the end; there wouldn't be nothing. The water would come and it would all go down. And they're just about right. I heard stories a long time ago; I don't know how these old guys predicted that. But that one time, you know, I heard a story told by my grandfather and he said, 'well, one of these days....,' he was telling it my dad and my dad would tell us. I don't talk Indian and my granddad could talk very little English.

NARRATOR: This talk of watersheds brings light to an issue that has been five years in negotiation—the Fort Hall Water Agreement. With one hundred and eighty-five thousand other water users on the Snake River system, this agreement, if approved, will ensure a future of a tribal people dependent on water. In fact, Shoshone-Bannock tribal members will become Idaho's largest water owners. Marvin Osborne is a member of the Fort Hall Business Council.

MARVIN OSBORNE: That's a very important issue. It preserves and protects our rights for use of water because we're saying that the 1867 Fort Bridger Treaty entitles us to this water so that we have first rights and the use of this water. Secondly, you know, without that water, economic development couldn't move or the natural resources wouldn't be protected because we have an abundance of water and we have a lot of agricultural land base that water is affected by. So we're controlling that entity and we're controlling that part and we're making good use of the water and its environment.

NARRATOR: Being the largest reservation in Idaho with the largest population of Indian people means good planning is crucial for protecting the land that remains undeveloped. Keith Ingawanup is the tribal land use director.

KEITH INGAWANUP: Right now, we're considering elevation restrictions. Limited housing development in certain areas. Preservation, more or less of mountainous areas, of woodlands, of our natural environment. We're looking at strict preservation, also wilderness areas, closing off roads and and closing down and limited access to certain areas.

It's preservation of what's there and what's existing and not destroying it by littering and having roads built and streams plowed out and cattle laying in the creeks and stuff. You know, there's got to be some responsibility. If you did that on somebody else's land, they wouldn't appreciate it. Or cutting down a bunch of timber just to cut it all down, to take it downtown and sell it, you know, instead of just leaving things alone and taking their fair share of what they actually need and not abusing it. That's basically our main purpose here is preservation of our mountainous areas. That's what a lot of our people like and are attempting to keep the water clean for our people. I think that's the basic goal of this department, is to keep everything the way it is and keep it intact.

NARRATOR: With all the conflict and concern over water rights, contamination of domestic wells, mining reclamation and pesticide management, one might imagine that the Shoshone-Bannock leadership would lose the connection to their spirituality and to the storytelling tradition. But just the opposite is true. Reservation land, in all its vulnerability, is protected by the force of a strong Indian value system shaped by the stories. The words of Emaline George echo clearly.

[BRING UP FLUTE MUSIC AS SEGUE AND FADE UNDER]

GEORGE: Yes, because we're Earth people, we're formed from the Earth, and we will survive because of that; we're in everything. Everybody calls it stories or mythology, or whatever they want to call it; but there's a lot of meaning to it. There's a lot of value to it to us, and for each plant, whether it be weeds, whether it

be the trees, whether it be the water, the various seasons. Every part of that has Spirit to us.

[BRING UP FLUTE MUSIC AS SEGUE AND FADE UNDER]

NARRATOR: Before leaving the Reservation, I asked about the six elderly women whose individual photographs hung on the wall of the Land Use Commission office. I was told that they were of those original Lemhi Shoshone people who were moved from the Salmon River mountain country to Fort Hall. They were children back then; but time has seen at least one of them past her 100th birthday. If a picture is truly worth a thousand words, these gentle and poignant faces tell endless stories of how there was once a treasured way of life, of how much has been lost, and the importance of saving and protecting what still remains.

[BRING UP FLUTE MUSIC AS SEGUE AND FADE UNDER TO END]

NARRATOR: Native American flute music courtesy of Ken Light.

OUTRO: VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH PODCASTS ARE PRODUCED BY ME, JANE FRITZ, AND ASSOCIATE PRODUCER JUSTIN LANTRIP FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER.

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WE ARE ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL TO THE IDAHO TRIBES FOR ALLOWING US TO SHARE THESE ORIGINAL RADIO STORIES AGAIN AS PODCASTS ON MYTHWEAVER.ORG, AND SPOTIFY AND APPLE PODCASTS UNDER VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH. THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.