**Kootenai Keepers of the Earth 1991 — Redux: August 8, 2023**

**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.

*[WOLF HOWLS, BRING UP, FADE UNDER, FADE OUT]*

**NARRATOR:**  In the far northern mountains of Idaho's Panhandle, are found vestiges of grizzly bear, woodland caribou and gray wolf. Animal species whose very existence has been threatened by civilization and which remains precarious today. But these creatures once roamed freely in large numbers and lived peaceably among a people who have protected the land for thousands of years. From the very beginning, the Asanka, the Kootenay Tribe of Idaho, formed a covenant with their Creator to be Keepers of the Earth.

*[FLUTE MUSIC FADE IN, UNDER AND FADE OUT]*

**NARRATOR:** The Idaho Kootenai were the last Native Americans in the state to be acculturated into the modern world. Their leaders stubbornly refused to sign the 1855 Hellgate Treaty and be moved to the Flathead Reservation in Montana, wishing instead to remain along the Kootenai River, their homeland. This decision brought the small band of Indians to the brink of genocide. It took over 100 years for the United States government to formally recognize the small band of Idaho Kootenai. In 1974, a Declaration of War, although only fought with paper and publicity, finally garnered formal recognition of the Tribe with 18 and a half acres of land northwest of Bonners Ferry establishing a permanent reservation. It was a far cry from the 128,000 acres sought, or the million plus acres of Aboriginal territory. Although some tribal members had acquired land during the allotment period of the 1930s, 95% of it eventually was lost to non-Indian interests. Ron Abraham is vice-chairman of the Tribal Council and natural resource specialist for the Tribe.

**RON ABRAHAM:** Through the years, we have lost lands through heirship, and people that are not connected with the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, acquiring these lands. We have bought back some of those properties and we have put them under the Tribe's name. These are income producing properties or agricultural properties. So what we do with the income from there we take those dollars and we put them into a land acquisition fund to continue to buy properties to add to the tribal land base. The other thing too, is part of the problem that we had faced; losing land was an heirship problem because Canadian Kootenay are not considered Indians by the United States government. When a Canadian Kootenay inherits properties from the Idaho land base, it is in a non-trust status, which means that the Bureau of Indian Affairs has no jurisdiction over them. They can do with those properties what they want, they can sell it, they can do anything they want with it, and we could buy them out or something like that, but without any monies as it was before. That's how other people got hold of Indian lands.

**NARRATOR:** Originally a hunter gatherer society. The Idaho Kootenai did not readily take to farming the land, and they had not forgotten their covenant with the Great Spirit to protect it. Amy Trice was tribal chairman when the Idaho Kootenai declared war.

**AMY TRICE:**  Some of them said that, well, the Indians didn't know what to do with their land or just sitting there not realizing that it was being preserved for the generations to come. We didn't want to, you know, cut anything off up there. We didn't want to put polluted, we didn't want to do anything with that land because it was given to us from Mother Earth , and it was up to us to preserve her for the next generation. Well, the white man came in and then took the land and said, We didn't know how to take care of the land. We didn't know how to produce it, make it work for us.

**NARRATOR:**  Losing the land that formed their very existence created chaos among the people and destruction of the family only compounded the losses. Children were taken away to boarding schools. Elders were put in nursing homes. Christian missionaries sought to destroy religious ceremonials. Indian hunting and fishing rights were denied, and alcohol became the salve for their overwhelming grief. By 1974, many of the elders of the Tribe had died from disease, alcoholism and exposure. Declaring war was a desperate but necessary move. Only three people over the age of 60 are alive today. Through these dark times, a young but committed leadership emerged, casting a hopeful light for the future of the Idaho Kootenai people. They learned the white man's ways, but haven't given up their cultural traditions. Raymond Abraham was elected chief of the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho in 1975. He was 18 at the time. It is a lifetime position traditionally reserved for elders. Chief Abraham remembers the story about the Kootenai people being put on the Earth to protect a spiritual covenant. This story shapes his vision for the Tribe, which is linked to education, cultural integrity, economic development, and natural resource protection.

**RAYMOND ABRAHAM:** I always dream backwards. I often wonder, you know, how life was 150-200 years ago, because those people had a tremendous, tremendous respect for the land, for themselves, for other people, for everything. They had respect for everything. I can imagine how hard life was, but they were content. They didn't have all of these problems that you have in today's world because today's world is made up of nothing but politics, and that gets into legal issues. That's all life is today. That's what I deal with day in and day out. And I often wonder how it would be 150-200 years ago, when you didn't have those worries.

*[FLUTE MUSIC FADE IN, UNDER AND FADE OUT]*

**NARRATOR:**  Basil White is the Tribe's sub-chief, one of its few elders and the tribal historian. Much of his knowledge comes through stories which provide a foundation of values.

**BASIL WHITE:** What I understand, there’s nobody owns the land. Like, I run into a lot of people; they say, ‘Well, this is my land. I paid for it.’ Well, I don't think any land was supposed to be paid for. The Earth is supposed to be wide open for anybody to live on. That's what I think. The way I understand long ago, there was nothing but animals on this Earth. The Creator created them and he just left on Earth and it was just open. They can fly anywhere they want. Go anyplace they want. So that's the way it's supposed to be right now.

**NARRATOR:**  Basil admits the humor and richness of his grandmother's stories lose something in translation from the Kootenai language, but they're still important to share.

**BASIL WHITE:**  *[SPEAKING IN THE KOOTENAI LANGUAGE]* This story I'm about to tell. It happened long, long ago; and it was told by my Grandma and I had it in mind all this time. It was nothing but animals in this world. At that time, the Woodpecker family was the chief, and at that time there was a giant going through, crawling in the river, which is called the Kootenai River. So they stopped that giant and asked him, ‘What are you doing?’ He turns around and says, ‘Well, since we heard that there was going to be humans put on this Earth, so I'm going around naming all these places.’

This Woodpecker family they were kinda jealous of him. So they told him, ‘Open your mouth, we're going to feed you.’ So in the meantime, they cut out a heart of an elk. They opened it and they put in a red hot rock inside the heart. They were going to kill this giant. So they say, ‘Okay, open your mouth; close your eyes and open your mouth and we will drop you something to eat.’ He does. He closes his eyes and he opens his mouth. And he knows right away that there was something inside the heart. So he gave a nod and nodded his head for the meat that's coming down to go sideways. So this meat went sideways and landed on the ground. So he just turns around and laughs and says, ‘Well, this place will be called Little Heart.’ So he named the place.

So the Woodpecker family told him ‘Okay, you go ahead, but do not camp wherever there's a creek coming from the side of the river here; if there’s a creek coming down, do not camp there.’ So he knew right away again that they were angry at him. So he turns around and tells the Woodpecker family, ‘You guys come back down, you go along the river, the Kootenai River, and wherever you see a fish struggling, do not touch it.’ So there it goes: They both put a curse on each other. So then he went along, this giant went along naming these places. And this Woodpecker family come down into this Kootenai River. And they were going along and all of a sudden they seen this fish struggling: coming up; going back down. Come back up again. This fish was really struggling around. The red-headed woodpecker was the big chief then. So he was getting ready to get after it. And his brother, his little brother, he says, ‘Oh, it's been a long time since you're a chief, and I'm not going to obey your order no more.’ So he jumps in, tries to grab the fish, and you know, there it went. It was that sea monster’s tongue that got him. It was that sea monster. Its tongue. It wasn't a fish.

*[SPEAKING IN THE KOOTENAI LANGUAGE]* So it swallowed him.

**NARRATOR:** That Woodpecker chief had to do something about the sea monster. But that's another story. Every story like the great Kootenai River meanders and flows this way and that, usually without an ending. The stories are not something passively experienced, but are alive and moving within the people. Cultural anthropologist Rodney Frey:

**RODNEY FREY:** As a story unfolds, the listeners are within the story in the same way they're within that landscape or interacting with an animal that really is, through the imagination, little distinction. When you tell the story, you are in the Creation Time. When you are within the storytelling, you are interacting with the animal and to differentiate them from an actual place, from a storytelling place, is difficult to do. When we read about something, or experience it through the eye of a camera, a television, a photograph, there's a sense of distance, of estrangement. That in the storytelling cannot occur, because you are there. You witness the mythical beings, you witness the animals and the fishes as if for the first time.

**NARRATOR:** His grandfather's stories of the Animal People told and retold word for word have stayed with Ron Abraham all his life.

**RON ABRAHAM:** I think it got me to where my mind started wandering into these mountains and I could see the animals doing the things that he was telling within the story. They said the animals could talk. And now when I go hunting, I sit and I listen to those animals talk. The animals talk in a certain language by, you know, different types of chirps or a howl, or a grunt or something like that. It was it was their way of saying, you know, certain things may be dangerous here or different things. Just like the squirrel, you know, the we call the squirrel the snitch of the woods, because you can be walking through quiet as a mouse and all of a sudden a squirrel will start chirping. And he told everybody within a mile around that you're around.

**NARRATOR:** The stories of the Animal People gave the Indian knowledge of what to know and what values to live. Amy Trice:

**AMY TRICE:** There was always a moral to the story. Every story there was something to it that reminded you of how to keep your land, how to treat your neighbors, etc.. And it always goes back to the land, you know, like the coyote done this. And this in the end, this is what he had to pay for, you know, because as you say, he was such a coward or a trickster or whatever it may be, you know. The wise owl was always like the upper hand. He was always the one that told stories. And the squirrel always ended up as the grandmother and she was always eaten or something. He was always in the kitchen preparing food for the other animals, you know. And I think it was always, you know, the moral part of the story. So that's had a lot to do with preserving our land and preserving our food. and raising our children to love one another, to respect Mother Earth and that sort of thing.

**NARRATOR:** A close relationship with the animals is something that naturally develops from listening to the Indian legends and myths. Dianne David is Secretary of the Tribal Council:

**DIANE DAVID**: I have a lot of respect for the animals. You go over to my house, I've got pictures of the bear and the elk and owl. The animals are just really important to me. I believe and I was told, that before the white people came, that the Indians were able to relate to the animals, to talk to the animals. I believe that that's why I have so much respect for them. What I was taught, I guess, and, my grandmother told me, if you're really close to the animals that, you know, sometimes they'll give their life for you. Sometimes when I lose one of my pets or something, the first thing that pops into my mind is maybe something might have happened to one of my family. My grandma told me, you take good care of them and you know, they'll even give their life up for you, if they know something's going to happen to you.

**NARRATOR:** Before the tribe was officially recognized by federal and state agencies 17 years ago, to go hunting and fishing in traditional areas sometimes constituted a considerable risk. Diane David was a teenager in 1976 when she was arrested for hunting deer on property that was in traditional Kootenai territory. Diane hunted for her family's survival. Her case, judged by the Idaho Supreme Court, assured that the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho receive hunting, fishing and gathering rights on ceded lands as beneficiaries of the Hellgate Treaty. These rights extend to any season. Diane still hunts for deer and begins each hunt with a sacred song. She remembers the story her grandmother told.

*[FLUTE MUSIC FADE IN, UNDER AND FADE OUT]*

**DIANE DAVID:** There was a really bad year. They were starving and they couldn't get anything. There was no game, there was no berries, no roots. And they really having a hard time and people were starving. And this boy went out to hunt and he came across this deer. But the deer had a broken leg and it couldn't run. It just they had no choice but to stand there. But he took his bow and he was going to shoot it because he thought, this deer could feed, you know, a lot of my people and they hadn't had anything to eat for so long. But when he was going to shoot it, he couldn't do it because he knew that deer had a broken leg and it had no chance. You know, he just he couldn't do it. And he started walking away and that deer called him back. And, you know, he told them that in a sense he did that for him. He was going to give them a song and that when he goes hunting, he's to sing the song and his he'll get in his animal whatever he's hunting for, because that was his way of showing his, you know, appreciation that, you know, he let him go because he had a broken leg. And so the deer gave him that song. And, you know, that's a song that, you know, you sing when you go hunting.

**NARRATOR:** Killing deer, moose and elk for survival is still practiced among Indian hunters today. Ron Abraham talks about Indian values related to hunting.

**RON ABRAHAM:** You don't go out there to hunt for the biggest moose, or the biggest elk, or the biggest deer that you find. You know, when it's time for me to hunt, I hunt because there's a need from not only my family, but other people in my Tribe; and, whether I go out there to hunt one deer or five deer depends on who needs something to eat. And that's what I do. And when I do get something, which is not always, we end up butchering it up and stuff like that. And then I take my share and separate the other ones to different families within the Tribe, making sure that it's spread out as far as it'll go. When I hunt, you know, I I don't hunt for sport. I hunt for, you know, to feed my people. It's not going out there to put a rack on your wall or something.

**NARRATOR:**  Velma Bahe is Tribal Council chairman of the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho. She returned to the Reservation after the 1974 War and first served on the Council when she was 19. Before being sent to Catholic boarding schools, however, she lived with her grandmother. She fondly remembers berry picking outings as a child and how free the wild animals were and what little fear they had of the Indian people.

**VELMA BAHE:** My grandmother, my mother, our father, you know, our aunts and uncles, all of us would camp next to each other and get ready for the huckleberries. The bears would come right up, you know, just a few feet just to watch us. And the mother bear would have her two cubs and they'd just look up and sniff at our food and, you know, go along. The elders would have branches and shooing them away like they were dogs, they'd have to get them away from their camps. And when I was younger, our pet used to be a wolf, you know. My grandmother said we'd go to the store, and you know, ‘We'd leave you kids out there and we'd run in and get our stuff. And by the time we'd come back out, you kids would be crying and wolf would be howling, right with you, just guarding you. And there'd be a lot of people, you know, just watching and taking pictures.’

You were living with these animals, you know. We always raised the chipmunks and the squirrels that we found wounded, you know, in the woods. So we bring them back and heal them. We even had a hawk that used to come right to us and we it. So, you know, we were raised with these wild animals. Now you hear of bears attacking. But at one time, we all lived together. I always, you know, think about where was that turning point? You know, when did we lose it? Because nowadays you can't go up there. These kids are taught that bears will attack you. They'll eat you, they'll kill you. And they have fear. They have so much fear. I don't know if it's from the teachings that they're getting now. If you went up there to live to pick huckleberries now, they're scared. So something is gone.

*[FLUTE MUSIC FADE IN, UNDER AND FADE OUT]*

**NARRATOR:** But the Kootenai Covenant with the Creator remains strong. They have not abandoned their homeland, and now they are working hard to restore it in whatever way they can. They are attempting to reacquire their tribal lands and have invested in nonpolluting industries such as tourism with the completion of the Kootenai River Inn, a motel wholly owned by the Tribe. They have also embarked on a joint project with the Northwest Power Planning Council and other entities to revive the nearly extinct white sturgeon population in the Kootenai River. Gary Aitken is the proposed Sturgeon Hatchery tribal manager and the first college graduate of the Tribe.

**GARY AITKEN:** I’ve seen this river in many good years. I first started going on because I wanted to see the trout and the kokanee and all the rest, the ling, go in. But in order to get our hatchery started in the first place, we had the sturgeon with high priority because they quit spawning and all the rest of the fish are doing the same thing because the river has been going downhill ever since that dam had been put in. And the ones that they recognized the most is the sturgeon. So we have to go with the sturgeon to start with. But my plans are to keep on going with the rest of the fish.

**NARRATOR:** Gary works cooperatively with state and federal agencies to mitigate the negative impacts of Montana's Libby Dam. He has a special relationship with the fish. Treating them more like family and is dedicated to restoring the health of the river, which will ensure the survival of the fish and his Tribe.

**GARY AITKEN:**  We've been living by this river all these years and it's been flooding us and stuff. Maybe the dams helped us on that and we don't have the floods anymore, but we're going to try to preserve that river because a lot of rivers below dams have turned out to be just a waste. I've heard stories about people going out and living off of the ling during the wintertime and ice fishing for the ling, that was another important food source, and now you can't even catch one.

**NARRATOR:**  Like the wild animals of the Panhandle mountains, the Kootenai Indians belong to this land; and despite their small numbers—120 tribal members with 68 living on the Bonners Ferry Reservation—and despite their losses, one thing that can't be taken away is the way they feel in their hearts. Ron Abraham:

**RON ABRAHAM:** Even though these lands are owned by thousands of owners and government and things like that, to me it's still Kootenai territory in a sense, you know, in that sense to me comes from my heart. These mountains haven’t moved, these rivers haven't moved. You know, there's been alterations. But still to me, it's Kootenai territory. The place is still there. You go down the river, 10,000 years from now, you'd reach the same spot. You can almost see where they travel. You stand on a mountaintop. You can almost see the the routes that they traveled. And the reason why they traveled there, to go to a certain spot to fish, to go to a certain spot to hunt, and why they traveled there at a certain time of the season. There was a different reason for why they did things, and when I stand on top of these mountaintops, I sit there sometimes and I watch them do that, you know, And it's it's a wonderful feeling. And to me, in a sense, I'm still doing that too.

*[FLUTE MUSIC FADE IN, UNDER AND FADE OUT]*

**NARRATOR:** Using the past as a stepping stone, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho hopes to regain Kootenai land, health, unity and tradition in order to fulfill the tenants of their covenant. But what does it mean to a people who once had this land and then had it taken away? Velma Bahe answers philosophically:

**VELMA BAHE:** It doesn't mean anything to me. What I was taught was nothing here on Earth is going to be yours anyway. When you leave, you will leave the same way you came in, that’s with nothing. I feel that when Indian people were put on here first and had everything taken away, I don't know if that’s plan of the Great Spirit for us. I don't know, you know, what's going to be coming in the future. But I believe that we're pretty strong, we respect our Mother Earth and our Father Sky and the world around us. And I feel that if we live in harmony that, you know, everything will be given back. We won't have to do any fighting, you know, with paper or anything. I mean, it's going to be given back the way it was taken away. In the end we will eventually have everything that we lost.

[*WOLF HOWLS BROUGHT UP AND FADE UNDER]*

**NARRATOR:**  Keepers of the Earth was produced by Jane Fritz for the Idaho Mythweaver in cooperation with KPBX, Spokane Public Radio. Technical producer was Verne Windham. Native American flute music courtesy of Ken Light.

**OUTRO:**

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

THIS PROGRAM IS SUPPORTED IN PART BY A GRANT FROM THE IDAHO HUMANITIES COUNCIL, A STATE-BASED PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES. ADDITIONAL FUNDING IS FROM THE BONNER COUNTY ENDOWMENT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS TASK FUND IN THE IDAHO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION.