



CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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American Immigration, the Canadian Counterculture, and the Prefigurative Environmental Politics of the West Kootenay Region, 1969-1989¹

Kathleen Rodgers

The “Genelle Three” were arrested and charged with obstructing a highway in late summer of 1978, after about forty people blocked a roadway leading to the site of uranium exploration in the hills behind the tiny working-class community of Genelle, just outside of Castlegar, British Columbia. In 1978, in light of rising uranium prices, industry advocates hailed the West Kootenay region, with its rich deposits, as the new uranium mining centre of BC. At the same time, the worldwide movement against nuclear armament also plagued the sector, inciting debate over a provincial moratorium on exploration. Thus, despite the small number of arrests and the remote location of the protests, the events garnered extensive media attention and crystallized the widely held view that uranium mining had no place in BC. In the spring of 1980, following the conviction of the protesters, the provincial government placed a seven-year moratorium on

exploration and committed to ensuring that all uranium deposits in the province would remain undeveloped.

The widespread public support for the protesters and their political victory can be partially explained by the fact that the Genelle protests were seen by the local community and law enforcement alike as a truly grassroots resistance to mining. The legitimacy of the anti-uranium claims came in part from the respectability that the identities of the protesters demanded. As the provincial judge stated in his decision to convict the “Three”—but at the same time give them an absolute discharge—“I was particularly impressed with the credibility and integrity of all three accused. All three are working family men and upstanding members of the community. . . . They were motivated by the honestly-held belief that the exploration activities could endanger the health of their families and the community at large.”² There was no question in these statements about whether the protests were the work of outside “agitators”; these were simply working-class people who cared about their families, their water, and their community.

That working-class residents in this small, remote community fought and won against industry appears to be an early victory for “environmental justice” advocates.³ But the depiction of the events as a success of the marginalized working class fails to account for the circumstances that led to the mobilization of local residents. In reality, like so many of the environmental initiatives discussed in this volume, the Genelle protests took place against the backdrop of a burgeoning local counterculture. In the thirty years that followed the events in Genelle, West Kootenay life was punctuated by episodes of environmental contention—most notably by protests against logging—but also against mining and pesticides and in favour of wilderness preservation.

While a “vibrant counterculture” in the 1960s hinterlands of British Columbia might have seemed unlikely, its existence in a relatively isolated location arose from the migration of thousands of Vietnam War-era Americans to the West Kootenays and the political traditions they represented. Owing to these politics, the West Kootenays became home to a counterculture that embodied an

overlapping set of values with respect to communalism, feminism, artistic expression, pacifism, democracy, a rejection of modern urban life, and a desire to go back to the land. Importantly for this chapter, members of the counterculture espoused an environmental critique of industry, represented in their politics and their own personalized quests for sustainable lifestyles.

The idea that environmentalism in Canada may have American roots is an unpopular sentiment in many academic circles⁴—and for good reason, as by the early 1970s grassroots environmentalism was not only a global movement but also well established in Canada. However, an embrace of environmentalism in rural regions remained exceptional even in 1978.⁵ Understanding the nature of West Kootenay environmentalism, then, requires an understanding of the importance of this local counterculture, how it took shape, and how its environmental critique sharpened, becoming tailored to local issues and developing into organized environmentalism.

This chapter discusses the American origins of these local efforts but also demonstrates how the most successful campaigns of the West Kootenay counterculture were those that transcended these origins and fostered a broader community response. The politicization of collective goods such as water and old-growth forests provided a common focal point for community members and mobilized a broader public.⁶ Still, the countercultural community—specifically, its leadership, expertise, ideas, and strategies—remained the epicentre of the resistance. For sociologist Wini Breines, the different ways of thinking and organizing within the New Left movements of the 1960s represented a form of “prefigurative politics,” a rejection of conventional forms of political action. This case study of two episodes of environmental contention traces the ways in which the prefigurative politics of the American migrants were central to this counterculture and transformed social life in the West Kootenays.⁷

THE PREFIGURATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN COUNTERCULTURE

American military conscription for the Vietnam War, combined with Canada's 1969 legislation allowing eligible immigrants legal admission to Canada regardless of their military status, drew more than 100,000 American men and women of draft age from the United States to Canada. For those who opposed the military draft, Canada was an obvious destination. But the war resisters were only one part of a much broader exodus of young people looking for alternative lifestyles; this retreat from militarism coincided with the hundreds of thousands of youth who joined communes or made the decision to go back to the land. With its vast stretches of inexpensive and virtually uninhabited terrain, British Columbia in particular provided a perfect context for Americans inspired by these ideals. That the young migrants would have a lasting impact in Canada is not surprising. Between 1967 and 1975, at least 19,000 Americans immigrated north to Canada each year, representing the largest number of American migrants to Canada since the United Empire Loyalists, and this rate has not since been exceeded.⁸

A distinct counterculture existed in Canada by the time the American migrants began to arrive. A counterpoint to the better-known American experiments, Canadian youth politics represented a similar emancipatory impulse. At the same time, the migration to Canada meant that the radical voices of New Left politics in the United States became loud and influential in Canada, contributing new political content to Canada's own prefigurative traditions. Frank Zelko makes this clear in *Make it a Green Peace!*, noting that even Greenpeace, Canada's greatest offering to environmentalism, was linked closely with American activism: "the organization may have started life in Canada but, to a large extent, its activist roots lie south of the 49th parallel."⁹ Therefore, the American background of the migrants *was* important, and not merely because these Americans added critical mass to existing activism in Canada. As Jeff Lustig notes,

“Discontented youth . . . agreed with Henry Miller that the American Dream had become an air-conditioned nightmare [and] were regularly told there were no alternatives.”¹⁰

The implosion of New Left politics in the US in the late 1960s led to a greater quest for such alternatives and therefore to the rise of the personalized forms of politics of the 1970s, such as back-to-the-land and communal living. These were not simply extensions of the 1960s political movements, but rather, new expressions that “served as a transition to a new environmental politics in which the question of Nature could no longer be separated from the question of society itself.”¹¹

When these personalized politics combined with the circumstances of the migrants’ lives in the context of the late 1960s, pockets of American counterculturalists took root in some of the most inhabitable but least populated rural areas around British Columbia, including the Gulf Islands, Bella Coola, Smithers, and the West Kootenays. Events such as those in Genelle demonstrate that in the ensuing years, at least in the West Kootenays, many of the young Americans took part in organizing local environmental campaigns and became active leaders, infusing local issues with environmental politics.

CONTEXTS OF COUNTERCULTURAL IMMIGRATION INTO THE WEST KOOTENAYS

The arrival and subsequent settlement of the counterculture in the region resulted from a particular constellation of economic and social factors. When the first few Americans began to trickle quietly into the West Kootenays in the late 1960s, the region was ripe for any form of development. This is not to say that the region was uninhabited. Indeed, the history of settlement in the region is rich and complex, consisting of multiple waves of immigration and economic development, as well as an Indigenous population that straddled the border with the United States. The largest wave of immigration accompanied mineral exploration in the late nineteenth century. European immigrants, many of them British, settled under the provisions of Canada’s

Dominion Lands Act, establishing fruit orchards and farming the region since the early twentieth century. Perhaps most notably, there was a significant population of Russian-speaking religious and political refugees, the Doukhobors.

As was the case in many BC communities, settlement slowed following World War II as agriculture and mining declined; as a result, limited industrial development occurred and the population stagnated. When the federal and provincial governments promoted regional resource expansion following the war, hinterland regions like the West Kootenays embraced forest-based activities such as logging and pulp production, and some population growth occurred. But in 1965 just before Americans began arriving in great numbers, the population of the entire region, encompassing all municipalities and rural areas (known as the Regional District of Central Kootenay), was just forty-five thousand.¹²

The limited local economy had kept land prices low, creating opportunities for young people with few financial resources to settle and build lives on moderately arable land in a spectacular natural landscape. These same conditions had, in previous decades, attracted other migrants looking to establish intentional communities. The Argenta Quakers and the Doukhobors had both settled in the West Kootenays owing to the availability of land and the geographic isolation. These two groups were very distinct from each other—and from the American exiles—but shared important ideological and political beliefs. In both cases, the immigrants had fled their homeland because of their political and religious convictions.¹³ Both communities shared values with respect to pacifism and agriculture. Based on these common worldviews and their own experience of exile, the Argenta Quakers and some members of the Doukhobor community provided practical and community support to the earliest American draft resisters. As ideological allies and back-to-the-land pioneers, the Doukhobors and the Argenta Quakers helped to create a hospitable environment for the establishment of the counterculture.¹⁴ As the flow of American immigrants and Canadian adherents to the counterculture expanded and pockets of countercultural communities began to

establish themselves, the region became a haven in which their prefigurative politics flourished. In this context, interactions between new arrivals and the established dissident groups began to decline, but they were frequently reactivated in the years following, during local political and environmental challenges.

STRATEGY AND RESISTANCE IN WEST KOOTENAY ENVIRONMENTALISM

As both an early and a successful campaign, the Genelle protests illustrate how the influence of the counterculture allowed the community of Genelle to leverage its very minimal economic and political power. Clearly, the provincial, national, and global anti-nuclear discourses assisted in the success of the Genelle protests.¹⁵ The deaths of uranium miners in Elliot Lake, Ontario, in 1977, for instance, had provoked international condemnation of the industry, and in Vancouver, growing concern about nuclear contamination had inspired the mayor to declare a “Trident concern week” as environmental groups in both the US and Canada actively protested the Trident nuclear submarine base in Washington state.¹⁶ For some in the Kootenays, a prospective uranium mine meant economic development in a perpetually depressed region, and as such, local officials supported the project. In a speech at the local college, for example, the regional representative of the federal department of mines stated that uranium mining was much more difficult in other geographic locations. “We are lucky,” he commented, “we live in a uranium province.”¹⁷ Thus, while the broader political context appeared to favour anti-nuclear protest, the local economic and political context was less propitious.

Local interest in the issue was sparked when Vancouver consultants for a Toronto-based mining company began taking samples from the hills behind Genelle, in the China Creek watershed, in the fall of 1977. Shortly after blasting began, and months before protest barricades were erected to prevent the engineers from exploring the territory, the Kootenay Nuclear Study Group (KNSG) formed in response to the exploration. Members of the KNSG were not from

Genelle. Most were former Americans who lived in the countercultural stronghold thirty-five kilometres away in the Slocan Valley. Several also had previous experience in the political movements of the 1960s US protest wave. Members of the group had heard rumours about the exploration in Genelle and had concerns about mining exploration in their own watersheds. In the subsequent months, members of the KNSG informed themselves of the evidence and arguments put forward by anti-nuclear advocates. The group launched a campaign to question the activities of government and corporate mining interests in the region—meeting with Jim Chabot, the provincial minister of mines, and the regional mines inspector—and to amass evidence in support of their belief that uranium mining was hazardous to the water supply and the health of the local population. The group wrote letters of protest, documented the exploration with photographs, invited experts to speak on the topic, and in the spring of 1978 began to liaise with members of the community in Genelle.¹⁸

The coordinator of the KNSG, a young American named Jim Terrall, spoke at a Genelle town meeting in order to explain “the dangers of radiation pollution in the drinking water and from a possible future mining operation.” Indicating the extent to which mobilization around environmental issues was not a common feature of local life, one account of the meeting noted that “up till then the people had been more concerned about dirt in their drinking water; radiation was a new concept to them.”¹⁹ Aside from their involvement in local union politics, the people of Genelle had little experience in civic action. However, the fact that explorations were sponsored by a Toronto-based consortium and a Vancouver-based engineering company was not lost on the assembly, and those in attendance resolved to form the Genelle Concerned Citizens Action Committee (GCCAC). The spokesperson and de facto leader of the group, Tom Mackenzie, an active union organizer, lent the group credibility among the local population.

In subsequent months, the GCCAC and the KNSG worked together closely, meeting with officials and planning a barricade to prevent mining equipment from passing and drilling inside the watershed.

When it became clear that the mining consultants would proceed with drilling, the KNSG and local residents began to talk of protest. Members of the KNSG were committed to the idea that social change should be achieved through nonviolent means. M. L. Burke, a member of the KNSG, recalls that within the group “there was a definite consensus that we should be doing this through nonviolent means.”²⁰ As summer arrived and a barricade was constructed, the group invited members of the Pacific Life Community (PLC) of Vancouver, a California-based peace organization dedicated to the use of nonviolence in the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.²¹ The PLC had become well known in Vancouver and Washington State for its anti-nuclear stance on the Trident nuclear-missile base in Bangor, WA. Most notably, PLC had organized acts of mass civil disobedience against the Trident base, orchestrating the arrest of thousands of protesters who scaled the facility’s fence.²² Well versed in the philosophy of nonviolence, the PLC presented the first of a number of workshops on the principles and practice of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience to the residents of Genelle. The workshop advocated classic principles of nonviolent resistance:

exercises were given on “listening” and on defining and communicating one’s concerns and objectives. There was role-playing practice for a number of confrontation situations with people acting the parts of “protestors,” [sic] “police” and “drill-crew members.” . . . Exercises in quick consensus decision-making were given and the instructors cautioned that “violence” and “non-violence” can never be mixed with any hope of success—use violence at any time, they said, and you destroy all your credibility and lose any sympathy you may have gained.²³

About thirty people attended the workshop: members of the KNSG and residents from other locations in the Slocan Valley. Despite the fact that no Genelle residents were involved at this stage, members of the KNSG went to the barricade and conducted their own workshop

on techniques of nonviolent resistance. Later, when a confrontation between protesters and mining representatives appeared imminent, the demonstrators employed these principles: representatives of the group informed police that they did not intend to engage in any violence or to obstruct the duties of the police. However, they also conveyed that “if improving the law might have to involve breaking it, well, there was a long and honourable tradition for this . . . and the people of Genelle were individually examining their hearts and their consciences.”²⁴

In the early summer, techniques of nonviolent resistance played a central role in the eventual outcome. On the morning of the arrests of the Genelle Three, the assembled protesters selected those who would be arrested. Strategically, they decided that only residents of Genelle should be detained. Having identified a narrow spot in the access road, the protesters commenced with their sit-in, forming a human chain to prevent mining equipment from passing into the hills where drilling was set to occur. Thirty-five kilometres away at the regional headquarters of the department of mines a delegation, including the coordinator of the KNSG, threatened their own sit-in when the water rights inspector refused to see them. When the meeting eventually took place, the official lectured them, pointing out that the uranium engineers had the right to conduct their explorations and that any further action would lead to arrests. When the group reconvened at the barricade and the bulldozer attempted to proceed, the group again formed a human chain. The police moved in and reluctantly arrested Herb McGregor, Eric Taylor, and Brent Lee, the three nominated Genelle residents, for obstruction of a public roadway.

The strategy employed by the organizers was a clear success. The fact that the people of Genelle were willing to pay the price of jail time to protect their water drew support throughout the province. In Vancouver, on the day following the arrests, the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation (SPEC) and the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility held a joint demonstration in front of the department of mines office to show support for the people of Genelle. Because of the arrests, the barricades swelled with protesters

throughout the summer as the trial of the Genelle Three proceeded. In late January 1979, on the day following the summary legal arguments for the Three, the province bowed to both public pressure and the momentum of the Genelle protests and announced its intention to hold a Royal Commission of Inquiry into Uranium Mining (RCIUM).²⁵ In his decision to convict the Three while handing down an absolute discharge, presiding Judge Bruce Josephson reflected on his respect for the individuals involved and on their legitimate use of civil disobedience. Drawing on comments from the then chief justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal, Josephson noted, “a society places a high value on dissent and other peaceful challenges to the rule of law.”²⁶ Shortly after the conviction of the Three, members of the RCIUM visited the site of exploration in Genelle. In light of the official scrutiny, the growing hostility toward uranium exploration in the province, and the “favourable” discharge of the Three, the consultants called off their exploration and commented, “We’re not in the business of fighting people.”²⁷

Genelle, with its population of just five hundred people in 1978, had successfully used the traditions of nonviolent civil disobedience to defend the community’s water from a powerful representative of industry. But while the strategic deployment of civil disobedience points to the influence of standard countercultural strategies, the use of such tactics also highlights the cultural ferment taking place. The events in Genelle represented the coming together of members of the counterculture with the region’s longer-term residents, a merger that was not always comfortable. Given the large influx of young counterculturalists—and the fact that they were American, in particular—conflict over values in the region was long-standing and in fact had increased cohesion within the counterculture. For the counterculturalists, the use of civil disobedience was a valiant, time-honoured tradition and a legitimate expression of discontent. From the perspective of those without roots in this tradition, civil disobedience still amounted to breaking the law. As evidence of this, one of the Genelle Three wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper following his conviction. While

apologizing to the RCMP, the letter writer conveys his personal struggle with the use of civil disobedience:

To my good friends the RCMP, sorry for any inconvenience. You did your job and you did it well, but try to realize when there's 50 of you and a little pregnant mother stands up to your chief to tell him she will lie down anytime in front of a car, there just has to be a reason. Laws were made by man to serve the majority. When they get old and no longer do this, but rather licence a few to jeopardize a whole village, it is time they were changed.²⁸

The Genelle protests were not the first episode of civil disobedience initiated by the counterculturalists, but they were the first in which members of the countercultural community and established residents came together. Despite never taking centre stage in the Genelle conflict, the counterculture brought forward ideology, tactics, leadership, and a cohesive community of people motivated and willing to promote local environmental concerns. The counterculturalists also supported the campaign financially. For instance, community organizers held a fundraising event to help pay the legal fees of the Three. The event included auctioning a homemade cake—a replica of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.²⁹ The cake was donated by Sally Lamare, just one of the American expatriates who had gone back to the land in the region. Unlike residents in other communities, where locals did not possess a tactical repertoire allowing them to successfully leverage their minimal power, those in Genelle employed the toolkit and resources of the resident counterculture. For this reason, the trajectory of conflicts over environmental rights in the West Kootenays is different than that of many other resource-based communities in British Columbia.³⁰

ORGANIZING FOR A HERBICIDE/PESTICIDE-FREE COMMUNITY

West Kootenay environmentalism is most renowned for its contentious anti-logging protests of the 1990s. However, some of the earliest and most successful environmentalist protest efforts involved campaigns to end herbicide and pesticide use. As with the Genelle protest, the leadership, organizations, and tactical repertoire of the anti-herbicide/pesticide campaigns were firmly rooted in the local counterculture. The broader success of the West Kootenay anti-herbicide/pesticide activism arose from the fact that the issue involved a broader public good. By framing herbicide and pesticide use as an assault by industry on local watersheds and local decision making, the protests spread to a much larger segment of the population. The trajectory of the anti-herbicide/pesticide activism of the 1980s had first taken shape much earlier, as a fervent environmental consciousness infused the small back-to-the-land communities. The prominence of the forest industry in the region had drawn attention to the impact of forestry practices and other industrial behaviours on the quality of local water. In turn, growing awareness of these trends facilitated the growth of organizations that later served as the launching pad for subsequent environmental activism.

By the time the first counterculturalists arrived in the West Kootenays, it was a well-established centre for highly industrialized logging activity, with a small number of companies controlling rights to timber extraction and production. Logging loomed large in the economy and politics of the region. Whether it was through their employment in the new tree-planting industry or as loggers, members of the local counterculture quickly recognized the impact of forest practices on the aesthetics of the local landscape and the quality of their water.³¹ With a fifty-thousand-dollar federal Local Employment Assistance Program (LEAP) grant, a local committee spent two years developing the Slocan Valley Forest Management Project (SVFMP); in 1975, it released a report evaluating standard forest practices and outlining a sustainable approach to local forestry. The committee's

final report garnered extensive local support from a wide range of stakeholders, but efforts to implement the plan ultimately failed.³² The process had nonetheless identified and articulated the community's collective environmental interests while also leading to new divisions within the community about how best to achieve their goals. While some favoured a continued institutional approach, a desire for direct action also began to take shape.

Out of the ashes of the failed forestry reconfiguration process emerged a number of activist-oriented groups with specific mandates to protect water and wilderness. First, in response to ongoing concerns about water quality, watershed protection groups formed throughout the West Kootenays. The first of these, the Perry Ridge Water Users Association (PRWUA), arose in 1981 in the Slocan Valley, where the densest and most active countercultural population resided. The PRWUA was among the first watershed associations in the province. Shortly after, the Slocan Valley Watershed Alliance (SVWA) formed, quickly becoming a powerful environmental and political advocate in the region and beyond. The SVFMP gave new life to the idea of creating a land conservancy in the Slocan Valley; the Valhalla Land Conservancy, later the Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS), the brain-child of three young Americans (Ave Eweson, Grant Copeland, and Richard Caniell), came together for this task in 1975.³³ After extensive lobbying of the provincial government, the VWS ensured the creation of Valhalla Provincial Park, and it continued to build a strong membership base and provide leadership in the BC wilderness protection movement. Thus, while environmental consciousness had been growing in the region well before the founding of the watershed societies and the VWS, these groups became the organizational basis for environmental consciousness and protest mobilization.³⁴

The groups monitored local forestry practice and engaged with industry officials on their use of pesticides/herbicides in the region. In the early 1980s, the residents of the Slocan Valley and nearby Argenta became aware of the intention of the BC Ministry of Forests to use products such as Roundup (glyphosate) to reduce excess brush and of BC Hydro's routine use of the herbicide to clear areas below

power lines. In Argenta, residents formed the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) to engage in direct action campaigns against pesticide/herbicide use in the region. In this context, beginning in 1985, the VWS, the SVWA, and the NAG launched appeals of Ministry of Environment pesticide/herbicide permits with the BC Provincial Appeal Board.³⁵ Without exception, board members ruled that the Ministry of Forests, BC Hydro, and CP Rail had demonstrated that their use of herbicides posed no threat to “man or the environment,” and the appeals were unsuccessful. In the earliest appeal, the panel concluded that, “notwithstanding the views to the contrary expressed by a number of sincere, dedicated local environmentalists, the treatments authorized under the Permits are justified and will not cause any unreasonable adverse effects.”³⁶ The organizations, buoyed by the belief that the local communities remained concerned about the possibility of adverse effects, lobbied the local representatives of the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) to establish the West Kootenay region as an herbicide/pesticide-free zone.³⁷ The RDCK, a strong supporter of local decision making, decreed that

the use of all pesticides/herbicides by the Ministry of Forests, the Ministry of Highways, BC Hydro and Power Authority and West Kootenay Power and Light Company be immediately discontinued and the boundaries of electoral areas A, B, D, G, H, I and J be recognized as pesticide/herbicide-free zones.³⁸

The RDCK’s proclamation did not prevent the environment ministry from permitting industrial spraying in the region, but it did serve as a platform for mobilization, setting the stage for three subsequent years of direct action against pesticide/herbicide use in the region. To better coordinate the direct action elements of these campaigns, an offshoot of the SVWA formed: Kootenay Citizens for Alternatives to Pesticides (KCAP). With continuing failures at the provincial appeals board, dissent grew within the countercultural communities, and in the summer of 1986, members of NAG, frustrated by the continued awarding

of permits, declared, “people are opposed to the use of pesticides by public agencies on public land. . . . The Regional District of Central Kootenay has declared this area a pesticide free zone. . . . Public servants must respect the will of the public.”³⁹ Waving banners reading “pesticide-free zone,” protesters in the Slocan Valley placed their vehicles across roadways to prevent CP Rail from spraying Tordon 101, and the NAG blocked the road by which Ministry of Forests vehicles could access their herbicide warehouse and surrounded helicopters loaded with Roundup to prevent them from taking flight.

In 1987, following the news that CP Rail’s permit to spray Spike 80W (tebuthiuron) on the railways of the region would stand, activists mobilized a much broader campaign. The now established network of anti-pesticide, watershed, and environmental organizations in the region coordinated a multifaceted campaign to involve the largest possible subsection of the Slocan Valley population. At this time there had been no successful challenge to the use of pesticides by Canada’s railway corporations, but the campaign drew momentum from revelations in Sault St. Marie, Ontario, that CP Rail would pay millions of dollars in cleanup and restitution after Spike had seeped from the rail bed into private yards, killing lawns and trees and seeping into basements.⁴⁰ The opposition in the Slocan Valley was fierce and effective, launched by SVWA and KCAP but drawing on the support of the RDCK, local schools, unions, and countercultural institutions. The groups encouraged citizens to join the campaign by signing petitions and writing letters to the minister of the environment and to the regional pesticide control manager (and hundreds of letters were indeed written). But members of the SVWA maintained their commitment to the idea that if these legal channels did not work, “illegal and possibly violent actions would be likely,” commenting that “they’ll have to put us in jail to get us out of the way.”⁴¹ As in earlier campaigns, leadership and ideas from within the counterculture were central. In one letter, written by Vietnam War veteran Philip Pedini and addressed to the local pesticide control manager, Stuart Craig, Pedini used his experience to frame his opposition to CP Rail’s use of Spike:

Around the base at Bien, Hoa Vietnam, from horizon to horizon, the land was “defoliated” from herbicide sprays. . . . Vietnamese women had so many stillborn babies, so many babies born with severe birth defects. . . . I cry for the Vietnamese people. I cry for my friend whose stillborn baby had no brain. . . . Who do you cry for Mr. Craig? Think of your friends and relatives. Your loved ones. . . . I’m asking you to explore the doubts you must have about pesticides. . . . The people of the central Kootenay live in fear of the spray truck contaminating our gardens, our favourite fishing and swimming holes, our livestock and our waters. We are afraid of what Spike might do to our children and ourselves.⁴²

Pedini also instructed Craig to consult Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the book widely viewed as the intellectual impetus for the modern environmental movement.

With CP Rail’s permits to spray sections of the region’s railway still in effect, the persuasiveness of such arguments began to take hold. In early July 1987, the pesticide control manager toured the contested spray area, where he was met by seven hundred protesters. In the days following, he recommended the cancellation of the pesticide permit, on the grounds that the spraying was too close to the water.⁴³ This was the first victory for anti-herbicide activists in the region and one of only a handful in the province. Commenting that the permit process was “screwed up,” a member of the local Environmental Appeal Board reflected on the victory of the protesters: “one of the things that makes me particularly pleased about working in this area is that people do question authority. They don’t automatically accept the fact that just because the government made a decision that it was necessarily the right decision.”⁴⁴ But the victory was incomplete. In neighbouring communities where much less resistance to the spraying had been demonstrated, the permits remained in effect and the spraying proceeded. In the following days, the editor of a local paper wrote, “the only conclusion that can be drawn from all this is that

the protests worked. Castlegar residents didn't get out and make their concerns heard. Slokan Valley residents did. It's as simple as that."⁴⁵

Encouraged by their own success, the activists of the KCAP, NAG, and SVWA mobilized the communities where the permits still stood. In the following twelve months, blockades were constructed in more communities around the region. In 1988, in Nelson where CP Rail intended to spray the tracks, the city council joined the regional district in applying for a court injunction to stop the railway from spraying Spike in and around the city.⁴⁶ When the efforts of officials appeared to be failing, local residents came forward and blocked the tracks.⁴⁷ Rather than risk the publicity of arrests, the CP Rail spray truck turned and left, and the company announced later in the day that it would abandon all efforts to spray the Nelson-Creston line. Following this victory, the director of the RDCK commented publicly, and ironically, on the failure of formal political channels to respond to the desire of people to keep pesticides out of their community and on the central role that the activism played in the successful outcome:

I would like to apologize for the futile efforts that we made to help you. I apologize for the lack of support from our learned judges, who may know the law, but know less about environmental matters than the least informed of you here tonight. I apologize for the area MLA's [members of the provincial legislative assembly], our representatives, who helped us not at all. I apologize for the . . . civil servants whose great salary we pay and who forever side with the companies and manufacturers who would drench us with their poisons. . . . Yours is a very great victory. Your agonizing moments, sleepless nights, lost time, and above all, your concerned dedication to a good cause, has brought us all a victory. The spark that you have blown into a great fire, burns now across the province as others become aware of what people can do and what politicians and the law cannot.⁴⁸

After a three-year battle, by the spring of 1989, CP Rail had no active permits to spray its tracks in the West Kootenays. That fall, railway officials even took participants in the anti-Spike campaigns on a tour of the tracks in their newly developed steam machine designed to eliminate weeds using non-chemical technology.⁴⁹

By the time the communities of the West Kootenays had come together to resist herbicide/pesticide use, this wing of the environmental movement was in full force throughout North America. SPEC had been raising awareness of the dangers of herbicide and pesticide use by BC industry since the early 1970s, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs had sounded alarm bells about chemical use in Aboriginal communities since the 1980s. Spurred by the success of the West Kootenays campaign, other rural communities launched appeals and engaged in direct action against the use of herbicides in their communities. Yet as recently as 2003, SPEC was fighting unsuccessfully against CP Rail's use of herbicides in the Vancouver region.

WEST KOOTENAY ENVIRONMENTALISM BEYOND THE COUNTERCULTURE AND BEYOND AMERICAN IMMIGRATION

Beginning in the 1980s, community-level logging conflicts became a regular feature of life in rural British Columbian communities; it was a period that earned the moniker of the "War in the Woods." Political scientist Jeremy Wilson comments that these forest conflicts transformed politics in a province that remains an otherwise "frustratingly inert democracy."⁵⁰ These dynamics were no less pronounced in the West Kootenays, where organized environmentalists engaged in a decade of logging protest. However, by the 1990s, provincial environmental politics were shaping the dynamics of local environmental struggles with public relations teams hired to crush the public image of environmentalists, successfully pitting labour against environmentalism. The population of the West Kootenay region had also diversified, and many of the activists on the frontlines of the barricades and behind the scenes of environmental advocacy were

not the countercultural pioneers of the sixties and seventies. Still, the influence of this generation endures, through the established organizations, the shared history and traditions of dissent in the region, and local commitments to sustainable environmental lifestyles.

A criticism regularly levelled at the Americans who came to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s is that they were merely looking to “drop out.” The story of the counterculture in the West Kootenays exemplifies the oversimplification of such narratives. Owing to the particular economic and social conditions presented by the West Kootenay region, the seemingly fanciful ambition of creating a non-violent, sustainable, democratic community seemed possible to the migrants as the population of like-minded newcomers reached a critical mass. The prefigurative impetus of the migrants to produce social change through personal and collective endeavours meant that community members formed enduring institutions and voluntary organizations, and launched repeated and successful environmental campaigns. Local environmental conflict reveals the importance of these origins; today, many leaders in the countercultural community remain active in local politics and at the helm of organizations, and they act out their commitment to a range of countercultural values through the politicization of their daily lives.

NOTES

- 1 Some of this material appeared in a different form in my book, *Welcome to Resisterville: American Dissidents in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014). I thank the press for their permission to publish it in this volume.
- 2 “Sentencing Transcript,” *Nelson Daily News* (hereafter *NDN*), 12 April 1979.
- 3 See Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990).
- 4 This concern stems largely from the very recent emergence of environmental history as a field in Canada rather than an emphasis on Canadian exceptionalism. See, for example, George Warecki’s excellent book, *Protecting Ontario’s Wilderness: A History of Changing Ideas and Preservation Politics, 1927–1973* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000). See also

- Alan MacEachern, "Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History," *Acadiensis* 31, no. 2 (2002): 215–26.
- 5 Maureen Reed, *Taking Stands: Gender and the Sustainability of Rural Communities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Tina Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 191–92.
- 6 The counterculture also inspired significant conflict over competing visions of life and economy in the region. Nancy Janovicek explores this theme in this volume, as I do in *Welcome to Resisterville*.
- 7 Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
- 8 John Hagan, *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 9 Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace!: The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.
- 10 Jeff Lustig, "The Counterculture as Commons: The Ecology of Community in the Bay Area," in *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California*, ed. Iain Boal, Janferie Stone, Michael Watts, and Cal Wislow (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 31.
- 11 Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005), 148.
- 12 "Regional District and Municipal Census Populations, from 1941 to 1986," on BC Stats website, accessed September 21, 2015, <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Census.aspx>.
- 13 Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 153.
- 14 I explore the welcome provided by these groups in *Welcome to Resisterville*.
- 15 Residents of Clearwater, north of Kamloops, also called for an inquiry into uranium mining after the announcement of plans for a mine in the region; however, it was only in Genelle that citizens engaged in civil disobedience.
- 16 David Gersovitz, "Pollution's the Price of Prosperity," *Montreal Gazette*, 20 February 1978; "Vancouver Protests Sub Base," *Calgary Herald*, 19 November 1975.
- 17 Quoted in Joan Reynolds, "The Genelle Diary," unpublished manuscript, 1979, Selkirk College Library, Castlegar, BC, p. 14.
- 18 Kootenay Nuclear Study Group, *Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1979).
- 19 Reynolds, "The Genelle Diary," 17.

- 20 Mary-Lynn Burke, interview with the author, August 2011.
- 21 See Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- 22 Ibid., 201.
- 23 Reynolds, “The Genelle Diary,” 26.
- 24 Ibid., 28.
- 25 A means of dealing with the public outcry, the commission was announced a few hours before a public demonstration opposing uranium mining was scheduled for the steps of the BC Legislature. Public hearings to be held throughout the province were abruptly cancelled when then Premier Bill Bennett issued a seven-year moratorium on uranium mining. Despite the abrupt end to the hearings, the commissioners, with Dr. David V. Bates as chair, released their report in October 1979, in which uranium mining was identified as a threat to public drinking water. The moratorium was not renewed in 1987. David V. Bates, J. W. Murray, and V. Raudsepp, “The Commissioner’s First Interim Report on Uranium Exploration,” *Royal Commission of Inquiry: Health and Environmental Protection—Uranium Mining* (Vancouver, BC, 1979).
- 26 “Sentencing Transcript.”
- 27 Reynolds, “The Genelle Diary,” 143.
- 28 “Genelle Man Accepts Decision,” *Castlegar News*, 8 April 1979.
- 29 Burke, interview. The Three Mile Island accident, which occurred in Pennsylvania in 1979, resulted in the release of radioactive waste into the Susquehanna River and the evacuation of local residents. To date it is the worst nuclear accident in North America.
- 30 However, note the similarities to the Denman Island experience, as covered by Sharon Weaver in this volume.
- 31 Valley Resource Society, *Slocan Valley Community Forest Management Project Final Report*, 2nd ed. (Winlaw, BC: Slocan Valley Resource Society, 1976).
- 32 See Nancy Janovick’s comments in this volume on the eventual adoption of this plan by the province.
- 33 Richard Caniell, interview with the author, 27 June 2009. For a detailed history of the VWS, see Jeremy Wilson, *Talk and Log: Wilderness Politics in British Columbia, 1965–1996* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998).
- 34 The SVWA was also active provincially, leading “For the Love of Our Waters” workshops and serving as a central organizer for anti-logging campaigns throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
- 35 Replacing the Pesticide Control Board, the British Columbia Environmental Appeal Board is an independent agency established in 1981 with a mandate to

- hear appeals under the Pesticide Control Act, Waste Management Act, Water Act, and Wildlife Act. These four acts have been amended and replaced in the intervening years.
- 36 Environmental Appeal Board, "Judgement: Appeal against Pesticide Control Act," Ministry of the Environment, Appeal No. 85/10 PES, 1985, J-2, accessed 28 May 2015, <http://www.eab.gov.bc.ca/1985ALLDECList.htm>.
- 37 Incorporated in 1965, the Regional District of Central Kootenay is one of twenty-seven regional districts in British Columbia.
- 38 "Minutes," RDCK, 23 June 1985, Philip Pedini personal papers.
- 39 "Spraying Blocked by Lardeau Residents," *NDN*, 17 June 1986.
- 40 "Soo Cleanup Over, CP Rail Says," *Globe and Mail*, 24 December 1988.
- 41 *Vancouver Sun*, 25 May and 17 August 1988.
- 42 Philip Pedini to Stuart Craig, 17 June 1987, Philip Pedini personal papers.
- 43 "The Squeaky Wheel," *Castlegar News*, 12 July 1987.
- 44 "Permit Process Is Screwed Up," *NDN*, 28 July 1987.
- 45 "The Squeaky Wheel."
- 46 "Nelson Joins Spray Protest," *Vancouver Sun*, 26 May 1987.
- 47 "Herbicide Protest," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 June 1987.
- 48 "Spike Protesters Celebrate Victory," *NDN*, 1 September 1988.
- 49 Dave Polster (former scientist and environmental supervisor for CP Rail), personal communication, 30 March 2011.
- 50 Wilson, *Talk and Log*, xxix.

