

Rural Roots Rising Episode 5: Building an Ever Wider Circle -- Transcript

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Narrator (0:05): Welcome back to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project! If this is your first time listening, Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Today's episode, "Building an Ever Wider Circle" is about telling stories, sharing skills, and expanding our collective understanding of history to create a more welcoming future for everyone who calls Oregon home.

Gwen Trice (0:45): The adult kids who had lived here for 50 years were saying, "Why haven't I heard this story before? Why don't I know about Maxville? I didn't know there were black loggers. What is this about?" It was just this anomaly-- what we thought was an anomaly!

Narrator (1:00): My name is Emma Ronai-Durning and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. In this episode, you will hear from Gwen Trice with the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in Wallowa County, the Northeast corner of Oregon. The Center offers a view into the lives of not only Black loggers in Wallowa County but also Native American, Greek, and Japanese loggers, and the overlapping but distinct discrimination that they faced. There are many places we could start telling the history of oppression in Oregon. Like Christopher Columbus, Manifest Destiny, or the disregard of Indigenous sovereignty. For this episode though, Gwen starts us off in the 1850s, when Oregon became a state.

Gwen Trice (1:49): Oregon joined the union with exclusion laws already in place that excluded free African Americans from living, working and owning land. And so they really had, Oregon had a strong sense of really wanting to be a white utopia. They voted against slavery, but they also didn't want free Blacks living and working and being in the space. And Oregon had a huge Klan presence. And really the Klan at that time was more of a social club. In the idea, there were so many members. Women belonged, kids, they had the youth. It was entrenched throughout all Oregon.

And La Grande was no different growing up here. I mean, Governor Pierce, he was there. I think there are pictures of him with Klansmen with their robes on and they backed his, you know, being governor and you know actually the library here is named after him as well. And so I know that before I was born, there was a cross burned in our backyard. And the last cross burned in La Grande in someone's yard, to my knowledge, was 1968.

That was a part of it in the early 70's. Just growing up and in grade school, we weren't allowed to go to people's houses. A lot of people said, "I can't, you know, my mommy says, I can't play with you because you're an n-word." You know, or "We could play with you out in the yard", or just really, "You're just not welcome to come over." That happened a lot. And so you just don't venture out too much from the family. Grandma lived down the street. I had a couple of friends

in grade school. Really it was always a big conversation between my mom or my mom and dad and their parents to make sure that, you know, the invitation was appreciated, but do you know what you're getting into? Or do you know, are you prepared for your friends to, you know, respond in a negative way, and so I was able to spend the night with a couple of my friends. One of my teachers in grade school, I spent the night at her house and she also had horses. But it was always that conversation ahead of time. It was, it was just very - I had nothing to compare it to, because I hadn't lived anywhere else, but I always wanted to leave as soon as possible.

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Gwen Trice (4:29): I would watch the, you know, the white lines in the sky and see the jets passing over and going, I wonder what that would be like? You know, just living outside of the space and thinking that it's got to be better. It's got to be, you know, different and truly it was, when I moved to the city, it was so different. And I was just, my mouth was wide open the whole time. I mean, I went to school, had my first black teacher. I couldn't stop staring at her. She was just, she amazed me and I was, I just fell in love with her. And started reaching out, I really didn't fit in though, because my background is rural, and the way I speak is considered proper. And so when I would be around city African American people, they'd be like, "you talk like you're White." You know, so it was there was this always this "How do you, how do you remain who you are, and find acceptance in spaces?"

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Narrator (5:48): Even though Black exclusion laws were still written into the Oregon Constitution until 2001, many Oregonians have never heard this history. For Gwen though, whose dad came to Oregon while the KKK-backed Governor Pierce was in office, these laws have impacted her family's ability to live and thrive in this state for generations.

Gwen Trice (6:14): Because there weren't very many Black kids, by the time I grew up - I did know that La Grande had a fairly large Black population, but once the young men got of age to get jobs there, they couldn't get hired. And so that really pushed them into the city. And then once like, Maxville and World War Two was happening. They get to Portland and Portland's not better. Portland still has the same issues that rural did because it's the same state. Well, I had no idea. I thought the city would be different, there in Seattle, it was I didn't have the same issues. But then when I went to Portland, I noted that there was, I used to call it, it's more conservative. But it's actually, there's an underlying tension that's there. And that's due to that whole idea of having exclusion laws and having people excluded. And there are many sundown towns across the rural landscape and across Oregon as well.

And so there's a lot of things that impact People of Color with, you know, whether they're traveling or wanting to find a safe place to eat. And a lot of people used to stop by my father's

house when I was a little girl that were traveling through and people, whether they were White or Black, they would say, well go see Lucky Trice. His name's Lafayette, but everybody called him Lucky. And he would let them know, you know, "where you headed?" Well, you know, it "make sure to carry some gas through this area". And, you know, "go here and to eat at this place. And this is a safe space here as well. You can stay here. Or just get through this place as quickly as you can before dark."

Narrator (8:05): Shortly after high school, Gwen traveled to the Seattle area to work at Boeing. After 9/11, she lost her job and put her energy into acting and videography. She started searching for a project where she could use her experience teaching and working with adult learners in the aerospace industry, as well as her skills in storytelling and art. That's when she heard about a ghost town called Maxville.

Gwen Trice (8:36): I began to do interviews with some of the elders in the community. Once I began to find out, I started hearing that "Did you know your dad was a logger?" and I went up to an old reunion that was near the town of Maxville by the name of Promise. And that Promise reunion brought me in direct contact with our family's logging history that was generational.

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Narrator (9:10): Gwen and her siblings had never heard the stories told at the reunion in Promise. The time she spent in Promise inspired her to document this nearly-lost history and took her all the way to Texas to interview one of the last living African American loggers who had worked in Maxville.

Gwen Trice (9:32): What was also unique about this history was I came to it almost too late. So all of the primary people who lived in Maxville, or who was a part of their story, the people that I interviewed were in their mid and late 90s. And so truly I'm getting it at the end of their lives or their memories and I decided I couldn't do the work from the city. It was really important to be in the same town where these people lived because there was no other- really there were so few Black people that live in Wallowa County, and I'm the only descendant, African American descendant from Maxville living in that space, and so it was really important to be there. And so at that point, I decided in around 2005 that, you know, this is time.

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Gwen Trice (10:34): I started doing presentations in Wallowa. And I started putting all of these things, these video interviews in the queue. So I really wasn't doing anything with them at that point. All I knew was I need to interview as many people as I possibly can before it's too late.

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Gwen Trice (11:01): After a while, I met with a woman in Wallowa County who worked at Wallowa Resources at the time as the director and she says, "You know Gwen, you oughta move here, we need you." And she introduced me to one of the producers for Oregon Public Broadcasting. And I took all my, all the things that I'd gathered. There had been a couple of older women up at Promise that made me a little sort of scrapbook of copied articles and pictures of people from the neighboring town of Maxville. And it was tied with bright orange yarn. And they just said, "Here's your story. Now you're the keeper of the word." And I just took it and added to that and it got bigger and more rich. And so I took all these documents and pictures and I lay them on the table at the offices of Oregon Public Broadcasting. And I'm telling my story, and I'm crying because I didn't know my dad then. He came to Wallowa County with his father in a boxcar from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. And just, I was still sort of getting used to that idea, that they came there so early that we actually had a toehold in this community. We had a place there and it just started to hit me really strong and the people at OPB, it hit them strong too. They just, once I finished talking and telling my story, there was just dead silence at the table and tears standing in people's eyes and they looked at each other and just said, you know, "We need to do this story. We definitely need to go to Wallowa County, talk with Gwen." Walked through the woods with their cameras and interviewed other people I lined up. Then I took all my videos and I allowed them to choose whatever footage they wanted to help create *The Logger's Daughter*. And that's the part that I think that is so important is, it tells my journey in the beginning of coming to, you know, coming to the knowledge, coming home, talking and making connections with the elders in the community. So it truly is telling the American narrative with the inclusion of the multicultural voices that contributed.

Narrator (13:31): The movie Gwen refers to, *The Logger's Daughter*, came out in 2009. If you would like to watch it yourself or share it with your community, you can find the link at RuralRootsRising.org. Since its release, Gwen has used *The Logger's Daughter* as a conversation starter in rooms across Oregon to discuss race, racism, and parts of our state's history that you can't find in school textbooks.

Gwen Trice (14:04): We brought it to the town of Wallowa and we showed it for the first time and over 130 people showed up with standing room only, with people just in tears. The elders are sitting upfront and their adult kids were wheeling them in and, and their parents are just crying and it was such a phenomenal piece because the adult kids who had lived here for 50 years, were saying, "Why haven't I heard this story before? Why don't I know about Maxville? I didn't know there were black loggers. What is this about?" It was just this anomaly-- what we thought was an anomaly! But as you dig deeper into the migration history of logging that there were Black loggers in the South, that there they were actually the most hired out of any industry in the South for Black people was the timber industry. The fact that I didn't grow up knowing that about him, and that he's gone now. And that I came home, it was a story that brought me home. And it brought me to a place where I wanted everyone's input. This is an American narrative.

Narrator (15:29): Finding that she wasn't the only person in her generation who grew up not knowing this history, Gwen took her role seriously as Keeper of the Word. With community

support, she opened the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in the former Forest Service building on Main Street in Joseph, Oregon. The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center is now a space where people are able to grapple with the complex history of Northeastern Oregon and, in many ways, the history of the entire state.

Gwen Trice (16:04): So there's the old logging practices, and there is what we do today. And there's still multicultural groups of people working in the industry. And there are still issues that are inside of that. So there'll be more work contributed by our young people in our community. And right now we're working on connecting with the Tribes and creating course curriculum talking about how the Tribes and their traditional use of timber, and then they've got a nutrition side that we don't, we don't eat any parts of the pine, but they, you know, pull off the black moss and they got dig pits and they have this process of cleaning it, baking it into bricks. We are also in the process of purchasing, now the old Maxville townsite.

And so with that, we are definitely into preserving the structure. We took the structure out of the Maxville townsite that was the only log structure and it was the structure used to run the business. But the idea of working together with this organization to create this vibrant, culturally relevant learning curriculum is powerful. We're excited about where that will take us and how it will connect us to more Students of Color who might - we want to just inspire people that you, if you are interested, if you have something about your heart that pulls you, there's places for you in these spaces, in these beautiful outdoor spaces. So we want to connect people to a sense of place. And archeology is a great way to discover and to get your hands in that work. And then part of the timber management that we'll have there will be for forestry education. So the idea is not just to serve our community but to serve Brown and Black youth to have a safe space to learn more about people that look like them, and how they thrived in spaces and in times when it was extremely difficult.

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Narrator (18:24): The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center wouldn't have been possible without the incredible support of community members that reached out to Gwen to offer their skills and resources. Whether it's carpentry, document preservation, nonprofit law or a few extra dollars, people give what they can because they believe in the vision of sharing often overlooked experiences to make people feel like they too have a place in Wallowa County.

Gwen Trice (18:54): It's super healing as well. And it's just that whole sigh of relief. Now, note that I don't go out of my house as much as I used to because you're always on, for the most part. You go to the Safeway, walk by the prescription counter but there's all the elders right there like, "Hey, I got a story for you." And just this idea of listening to one another, and hearing another perspective of this story and hearing from my Native American brothers and sisters who talk about their experience in the logging camp. And seeing Japanese loggers there, and the government people coming to take the Japanese away and that the camp stood for them and

said, these are our, you know, these are our friends, they're not our enemies, you should have no right to take these people from us.

And so it's this idea that we're building these little micro-communities inside of our communities and we're lifting each other up and we're, I find that there's a lot of us that are struggling with the world around us, that so many things are politicized or they're, polarizing places to talk and there seems not to be safe places to talk about. So when you can find places like Maxville where we really want to talk about all of us and talk about community and connection and healing, and all of that. That's a natural attractant to people who have been looking for something to connect to and to believe in. And people respond.

And they do often say, "I'm a retired librarian, how can I help?" "I'm a retired contractor, when you get ready to put that building up, call me, I want to help work on it." And an engineer in La Grande, he says, "I've known you since you were 17. You don't remember me, but I've been watching your work. And we're so proud of you. When you get ready to get that building up. I'll do your engineering for free." We've got this network, all of our grantors, they've become part of our families because they get the work, they get the healing, the work that we do. They've seen us in action. They've seen us in pain. They've seen us in deep pain over this work of some of the things that come out of people's mouths. They, they're surprised. And now we kind of have a better sense of what you really are experiencing in your world and we need to be responsive to that and support you instead of you know, giving it to everyone around you because you are impacting not just your community but you're changing the history of Oregon.

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Narrator (21:46): As Gwen says, the story of Maxville is truly an American narrative. By making this history available for tourists and locals alike, the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center is expanding the idea of who belongs in Wallowa County and in Oregon. Rooted in her drive to make young People of Color feel more fully at home than she did growing up, Gwen is building partnerships with the schools and creating curricula to engage and inspire students.

Gwen Trice (22:19): I think they're really coming of age in so many different ways because folks are really trying to understand what identity is. And it's not just through the color of our skin, but it's through how we see ourselves, how do you know, how do I relate? Am I he, she, they, you know, or LGBTQ people are searching and really defining themselves in these positive ways, and I think that it creates space for more tolerance of each other. You know, like when you have a class and you have young people, they gotta go home to their families. And so a lot of times, that's where we get those biases and those opinions about other people that we don't know anything about.

You're changing, you know, how we connect in the schools, creating this curriculum to me is going to be so amazing. I get to give back what I did not get. That's, that's truly amazing. And that's healing to me, is I don't get set aside from my fellows in first grade by a teacher that

doesn't know. That's telling me that you can only be a nurse, so don't strive to be a doctor or anything more. I mean we're taught to tell kids of color that "You'll only going to be able to get a job like this. So don't try harder." So I get the gift all the time from people of just their willingness to step into the circle and say like, "Where do I fit in? This is what I do." And I love it. I love being a leadership for that, of really being able to tie their strengths to the work.

Narrator (24:10): By not only inviting people into the physical space of Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center, but also bringing the lessons from that space out to people in schools, festivals and museums across the state, Gwen's work is the epitome of building stronger and more vibrant community. She is supporting a well informed and educated public, which is a cornerstone of a strong democracy. And this goes beyond her work around Maxville specifically. In collaboration with the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District, Gwen also organizes workshops and conversations on racism, white privilege and how our communities can become more welcoming.

Gwen Trice (24:53): A lot of times, folks take it very light and they're laughing and I have to remind people that you know, this work is difficult work. And it's not work where you pat yourself on the back because you did it. You're showing up to show that you have a capacity for understanding somebody outside of your group, and outside of things that you are surrounded by. And it's super important that you acknowledge that in a respectful way.

And so we're really learning how to create those communication tools. How to figure out what being an ally is, as a White person to a Person of Color. What are the actions that you would take? What kind of practices should we be doing? And those things are difficult like I say, but we keep showing up. We keep filling those spaces because people really do want to learn and they want to incorporate it into their small businesses. And so that's another thing that's really hopeful to me is when I first came back, I didn't see it near as much or wasn't happening at all. And there's been a great shift in that work amongst the communities around so we're excited about seeing the long term changes.

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Narrator (26:22): You have been listening to "Building an Ever Wider Circle," the fifth episode of Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project. This monthly radio show and podcast is created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Do you have comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? Tell us what you think at info@ruralrootsrising.org!

Want to learn more about Oregon's founding as a white utopia and how that legacy still plays out in our communities today? Visit ruralrootsrising.org for more information about Oregon's racially exclusionary laws, the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center, *The Logger's Daughter*, and traveling exhibits about Maxville. If you are part of a rural museum, historical society, or

other cultural institution in Oregon, we have shared resources for how rural institutions can advance racial and social equity at ruralrootsrising.org.

We featured music from the Road Sodas, Gene Burnett and Plz Responder.

Do you want to help us share powerful rural organizing from across Oregon? Send us your organizing stories, ask your local radio station to play this podcast, and donate to sustain this project at ruralrootsrising.org!

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