# A Radical Thread

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*Transcript from the recording's auto-generated captions, lightly edited for clarity. Bracketed notes mark film clips and passages that could not be made out.*

*[Recording begins mid-sentence.]*
...and the creative projects that came out of that, that contributed to their sustainable living for over 60 years.

So in the late 1960s, the back-to-the-land community coalesced near Nevada City around the poet Gary Snyder. Snyder had been part of the Beat poets, but he left San Francisco to live sustainably on the San Juan Ridge. Initially he bought the land with Allen Ginsberg, but Allen ultimately went back to San Francisco, and Gary stayed and committed himself to the study of place, which is something we've heard a few times today. He became a leader in the environmental movement and worked closely with Governor Jerry Brown to enact laws to protect the environment, and Brown nominated him as California's poet laureate.

In Snyder's numerous publications, he articulated the stark choice confronting the world: to either turn toward sustainable living or ultimately face an uninhabitable planet. And he believed sustainability was possible through developing a sense of place and knowing the environment where you were. What was different with Snyder's approach from other back-to-the-land groups that were popping up all over the place, many of which descended into [unclear], et cetera - we've all seen those films - is that Snyder and the Ridge community established partnerships with industry and the Bureau of Land Management. Gary came from a really rural background, and so he was able to really work with some of these government officials and create pretty amazing strategies that proved economically feasible and productive, and are actually now recognized on both a national and a state level.

So this is just a tiny bit of archival footage of Gary from the early 70s at the Brockport Writers Forum.

*[Archival clip, Gary Snyder:]*
Because they say America cannot turn back. America cannot stop this manifest destiny of growth. And besides, you are all junkies. You are all hooked. You wouldn't want your dope to be cut off, would you, baby? Nobody is willing to pay the price, they say.

So young artists, architects, musicians, writers, all kinds of creative people were drawn to the Ridge, and an incredible group of people began to spontaneously come together into community. Everyone had their own land. It was not a commune; there was no communal land. And there was no religious or ideological unity. There was no guru. It's something that happened spontaneously. And what held this community together, and still holds this community together today, is a love for the land, for a sense of place, and a commitment to protect that land.

One of Gary's closest friends, Marsha Stone, who you see here, moved to the Ridge shortly after Gary, and she was a weaver. Her creative spirit was really emblematic of the ethos of the people who came, to combine the arts and ecology. One day she was browsing in the Grass Valley bookstore and came upon a book about the Bayeux Tapestry, which has been in the press a lot because it's

traveling for the first time in hundreds of years. And she thought, oh, we could do that up here. She decided she would tell the story of the San Juan Ridge community - not a story of conquest and war.

She invited Jennifer Rain Crosby to collaborate on the illustrations for the tapestry. Jennifer and Marsha worked with the community every step of the way. They met with dozens and dozens of community members, asked what the most important stories of their community were that should be visualized in the tapestry, and they enlisted hundreds and hundreds of volunteers. After 17 years of stitching, the community completed 12 tapestry panels totaling 83 feet that celebrate 60 years of living collaboratively on the Ridge. This little clip shows the beginning of that collaboration and how they worked together to determine the stories.

*[Film clip, Jennifer Rain Crosby:]*
In 2006, Marsha asked me if I would embark on a journey with her to illustrate a tapestry series that describes the culture and history of the San Juan Ridge. The idea was so big it was mind-boggling, and I was terrified. But I also knew that I wanted to do it. There were so many stories and we couldn't figure out which ones to include, but they all required research and we really wanted to get going. So finally, I decided that I would do the Halloween gathering, because I'd been going there for 30 years and I could rely on my own memories for it, and I didn't have to consult with anyone. So that's what I did.

*[Film clip, Marsha Stone:]*
She came out with a sketch for a 12-foot tapestry. It was so huge. And she said, I need that much room because I have a lot to tell about that day. And I love that, because the Halloween celebration is just one of the rituals we've developed here, where we bind the community together.

*[Film clip:]*
So the first tapestry starts with everyone arriving in their cars and bringing their picnic baskets and hiking up the steep hills - a little sign that says "up this little hill" - arriving at the meadow. And then the ceremony itself is described in four circles across this largest of all the tapestries.

So I was invited... My colleague at California College of the Arts, Suzanne Cockrell, had met Marsha and wanted to make a film, but she didn't have filmmaking experience. So she asked if I was interested in doing a film on this tapestry project. Initially I just was not interested, because I don't make art about art. I thought it could be a sweet 20-minute film. But when I began researching it and began meeting the people, I realized that the film that needed to be made was a film about the community that is told through the tapestry, and that is what we then proceeded to do.

The San Juan Ridge is situated on the unceded land of the Nisenan tribe, and the Ridge's back-to-the-land ethos created a framework for protecting the land for the first time since the Gold Rush. And the Gold Rush really decimated the Native population. A principal voice in the film is Shelly Covert, the Nisenan spokesperson, and she contextualizes the tribe's genocide and, with it, the suppression of their wisdom and cultural practices that left the land environmentally devastated. And I really thought about the Palestinian ecocide when I was watching that presentation, about how ecocide was happening in the 19th century, and this is a really clear example of it. Throughout the film, she presents the potential power of the revival of Nisenan cultural history. And they just recently did get some land back, to aid in this mutual quest for sustainability. I'm going to give you just a little clip of her.

*[Film clip, Shelly Covert:]*
The folks that came in the 70s, there was this real back-to-the-land, and they were a deep-thinking group of people. And what changed was the attention to the landscape: that the land is alive, that we need it for our children. That is in real harmony with what the tribe lost. If that movement in the 70s hadn't happened, where would we be today? It's only been very recently that the tribe itself has found enough foundation to begin educating people.

So one of the many threats to the community over the years, gold mining, really remains one of the most urgent. As soon as the price of gold goes up, like it is right now, mining industries start trying to dig again. And so the community has had to rise up over and over and over again to stop the mines. The most recent one was in 2024, and they were successful. The environmental devastation from the hydraulic mining of the 19th century is hauntingly evident in the horrific scars from it. So even though we think of gold mining as a thing of the past, it really remains here in California a real pressure on our environmental landscape.

*[Film clip:]*
So this is a road through gravels that you drove across here, called the diggings, that used to be 200 feet under dirt, and all that dirt was removed so that they could get the low-quality gold. It's not like nuggets; it's more like gold dust. But that's what they went after. By 1865, there were thousands of people living around here, and everybody was dependent on hydraulic mining. What was new was the application of pressurized water against a gold-bearing body - in this case, an ancient river, 60 million or so years old. You're just looking at the pit here, and this is a gigantic pit: 7,000 feet by 3,000 feet by over 600 feet deep. You have to hand it to these guys. That is vision. A hell of an endeavor. But I don't approve.

So the film isn't just about the past. It's really equally, if not more, about the next generation, because one of the things about this community is that the generations continue to live there. And the most pressing issue for the community today is climate-caused wildfire. They are in one of the most dangerous spots in the country for fire. And again, the community is tackling this through their collective action and their community ethos. The third generation of residents involved are mostly women, and they've created Force of Nature Forestry to clear land of flammable brush, get rid of the understory, and make it more fire safe. And Jennifer Rain Crosby, who's the tapestry illustrator, is the co-director of this group.

*[Film clip, Jennifer Rain Crosby and others:]*
Tending the land is something so natural for me. And it seems like the people around me, who are predominantly women, it just speaks to us. What I really noticed in the forest is the forest doesn't give one iota what your gender is. You can make a huge impact on a place regardless. And I think that we really like to have fun. One of our goals is that if we're not having fun, we need to change what we're doing, because this is naturally fun work. When you look out in the brush that hasn't been cut at all, it just looks like this overwhelming, monumental task that's impossible. And the tapestry project was the same way. It was enormous; you couldn't even wrap your brain around it. But the tapestry project is finished now. And I believe that in the hands of a few determined people, we can make our community fire resilient.

So what really becomes evident in the film is that 17 years, hundreds and hundreds of stitchers, 83

feet of tapestry can really only be realized by a community that values their collective commitment. And that is the same collective commitment that has enabled them to thrive for over 60 years. They prevented the Yuba River from being dammed. They stopped the Forest Service from coming in and logging the land. They've stopped the mines. It's been amazing, the success of this community. And they're just really so much fun to be around also.

Each tapestry panel has a list of the stitchers who contributed to it on the back, and it's really an archive of their friends and their community and their families and visitors. The shared knowledge is stitched into the tapestry, and it really offers a roadmap, I think, for other communities and future generations. The film expands on this knowledge by contextualizing it, and puts it in a form where we're taking it around the country to communities who are interested in this kind of community sustainability, and making it available to audiences, to give a sense of what other people can do in their communities.

I have a two-minute trailer. It has a few of the bits of footage that you just saw, but if you don't mind seeing those few seconds, I can just show it, and it gives a little broader context. So I'll run that now.

*[Trailer for A Radical Thread plays. Several lines repeat clips heard above.]*
Having a tapestry that lasts 1,000 years is saying 50 years from now, we're still going to be doing this; 100 years from now, we're still going to be doing this. ... The story of gold is all about: get the goods and get out of here. ... This cradle has been around the Ridge for decades. ... I love this community so much. ... We have a prayer to the salmon, that they belong here, and it is our hope that they return. ... Our generation has unified to protect this community by focusing on wildfire prevention. That's what the community is really about: seeing a need and stepping up and saying, I want to be part of this. I want to add my stitch.

So the film is going to show at 5:30 upstairs, if anyone wants to see it in its entirety. Thank you so much.