

Unlikely Alliances: Where were the Cowboys at Standing Rock? **Zoltán Grossman, The Evergreen State College**

In recent years, powerful alliances of Native nations and their rural white neighbors have stopped major resource corporations from carrying out their plans, in a common defense of the same land and water they've historically contested.

For example, Lakota and white ranchers and farmers joined forces in the Cowboy Indian Alliance to stop the Keystone XL pipeline in South Dakota and Nebraska.

Similar Native alliances with white farmers, ranchers, or fishers have stopped mining plans in Montana, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, and blocked proposed oil and coal terminals in Washington and Oregon.

I've chronicled many of these alliances in my new University of Washington Press book *Unlikely Alliances: Native and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*, which I'll be signing in the book fair after this session. I found that areas where tribal nations fought the hardest for treaty rights and sovereignty is where these alliances have been easiest to form and most effective in defeating threats to the land and water.

Among the first of the unlikely alliances were in Oceti Sakowin territory, or Lakota/Dakota/Nakota treaty lands.

As early as the late 1970s, Lakota AIM activists, white ranchers, and local environmentalists united in the Black Hills Alliance

to successfully protect the sacred *He Sapa* from coal and uranium mining.

That's where I got my start in activism as an 18-year-old, by helping to organize the 1980 Black Hills International Survival Gathering, on the spread of rancher Marvin Kammerer.

The Cowboy Indian Alliance, with its poignant acronym CIA, later had its first life in stopping a Honeywell

depleted-uranium munitions testing range in the southern Black Hills, eventually turning the sacred canyon into a wild horse sanctuary.

Its second iteration was fighting a coal train planned from the Powder River Basin past Pine Ridge.

The third Cowboy Indian Alliance convinced President Obama to cancel the northern leg of Keystone XL, and has renewed its opposition under President Trump. As Faith Spotted Eagle said in my book, "We come from two cultures that clashed over land, so this is a healing for the generations."

She added when the pipeline was dropped in 2015, "We stood united in this struggle... Native, Cowboy, Rancher, landowners... we have come to see each other in a new better, stronger way."

The Black Hills Clean Water Alliance has recently joined Lakota and white residents, even bikers at Sturgis, against new plans for uranium mining in South Dakota.

So while visiting Standing Rock in early September (with my wife Debi McNutt bringing supplies and donations from Olympia, Washington),

I had to ask the question: "where are the cowboys?," because they were nowhere to be seen.

Local Native organizers were very open to unity with ranchers and farmers along the 1,172-mile route of the “black snake” through North and South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois, asking (in the words of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard),

“everyone who farms or ranches in the local area, and everyone who cares about clean air and clean drinking water stand with us.”

They’ve been backed by former KXL opponents from Nebraska and *South* Dakota.

Farmers in Iowa have strongly opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline, resulting in many protests and dozens of arrests.

Standing Rock has been backed by Dakota Rural Action, Bold Iowa, and other rural groups. But in contrast, *North* Dakota farmers and ranchers were only rarely visible in the DAPL fight, and according to Faith Spotted Eagle, a passive invitation did not attract them to the camps.

Most local landowners gave in to the “eminent domain” confiscation of their property for the \$3.8 billion pipeline, even if they mistrusted the company’s promises of safety, especially a 2013 Bakken pipeline spilled oil into a wheat farm near Tioga.

Other farmers became more fearful of the Native water protectors on the roads than of the pipeline. It’s not that the white landowners didn’t have reasons to be alarmed by the pipeline, carrying 450,000 barrels of oil a day.

Indigenous Environmental Network organizer and Cheyenne River tribal citizen Joye Braun stated, “When this proposed pipeline breaks, as the vast majority of pipelines do, over half of the drinking water in South Dakota will be affected. How can rubber-stamping this project be good for the people, agriculture, and livestock? It must be stopped...with our allies, both native and non-native.”

Standing Rock descendant Waniya Locke noted, “The Missouri River gives drinking water to 10 million people. We are protecting everyone They are violating not only my people of Standing Rock, but they are violating ranchers and farmers and everybody else who lives along this river.”

Braun stated in an interview that Linton-area landowners had visited the camp, and other landowners were “pretty upset about what’s going on.” One Emmons County landowner said, “The first thing I thought about when I heard about the Bakken pipeline was that beautiful black soil that my grandmother taught me to love.... She’d always point it out to me when she’d see that beautiful topsoil... the best soil there is...

.[I]t hurts see it trenched and piled up and eroded the way it has been.” Although her sentiment may be shared by other white landowners, they remained largely quiet.

Three reasons may explain the relative lack of visible rural white participation in North Dakota to stop the pipeline.

First, the oil fracking industry has made North Dakota number two in U.S. oil production, after Texas. It has become so powerful in this new Petrostate that fatalistic private landowners assume that would lose any legal battle against eminent domain.

Braun explained in our interview, “There is support from non-Native landowners, not as overtly as in Nebraska or even South Dakota, because of the political atmosphere here in North Dakota, because oil is such a big deal There has been contact; it’s very difficult for them to come out. Sometimes we’ll be at a rally in Bismarck, and some of the local people will come to give out cupcakes but they don’t want their name known or

anything. That's a hard sell."

A few individual white landowners have defied the pipeline company, and as Braun's described, "had words" with company. For example, the tribe announced on September 2 that the landowners of the Cannonball Ranch, David and Brenda Meyer, had allowed a tribal cultural survey on their property in the pipeline corridor just north of the camps, violating their easement agreement with the company. The tribe had documented at least 27 burials, 16 stone rings, 19 effigies, and other features. A tribal historic preservation officer described a stone representation of a constellation as "one of the most significant archaeological finds in North Dakota in many years."

The following day, the company took its bulldozers to level the same site, and its private security contractors unleashed pepper spray and attack dogs on 200 unarmed Native water protectors, injuring six (including a pregnant woman and 6-year-old girl).

We saw the same K-9 unit on the roads a few days later.

In the face of this harsh repression and steadfast resistance, the camps quickly mushroomed in size,

and water protectors began to lock themselves to equipment to halt construction.

But the landowners unexpectedly sold the Cannonball Ranch to the company, according to Wasté Win Young, because they faced huge fines for allowing the survey and were "bullied" into selling the land.

According to tribal chair David Archambault II, the landowner was "in the middle of something he's not happy with." This land sale allowed the pipeline to be built under the river.

The second, related reason that most rural whites stayed quiet is that the DAPL permitting and construction was "fast-tracked," in contrast to the drawn-out, multiyear process around permitting Keystone XL. In fast-tracking their pipeline, Energy Transfer Partners pit Native and white communities against each other.

The route originally was proposed to cross under the Missouri River near the state capital of Bismarck but the company rejected this northern route because it "could jeopardize the drinking water of the residents in the city of Bismarck." In a classic case of a racialized "shell game," the route was diverted southward to cross the Missouri just north of the Cannonball River, the boundary of the Standing Rock Reservation and its main source of drinking water.

The pipeline companies perhaps realized that delays could allow rural Native/non-Native relationships to develop, and solidify into a strong coalition like the Cowboy Indian Alliance. Braun stated as soon as landowners "start seeing the raping of the land, the bulldozing, and they start seeing how big [the companies'] so-called small tract of land is, then they start to get really worried." The company was obsessed with constructing pipeline segments as facts on the ground that would be difficult to reverse.

This January a dozen irate landowning families even sued the company for fraudulently pressuring them to quickly sign away an easement for a low price.

Other ranchers and farmers expressed frustration at the "mess" and erosion left behind by pipeline construction, which disrupted pastures and the health of newborn calves.

The third reason for the lack of visible local white participation is that government and media accounts

have tended to demonize and criminalize the Native opposition.

After a Lakota spiritual leader was heard urging others to “load your pipes”—meaning the chanupa wakan (or sacred pipe)—

Morton County Sheriff Kyle Kirchmeier announced at a press conference that the activists had “pipe bombs.”

Indigenous Environmental Network organizer Dallas Goldtooth replied, “These are dangerous statements by Sheriff Kirchmeier and only foster greater resentment between local native and non-native residents.”

Racism in the state have generally been more intense than *even* in *South* Dakota, as one can see from this note behind a Bismarck hotel desk.

Recent history included the long and divisive conflict over the University of North Dakota’s racist “Fighting Sioux” team name

(although after the team faced NCAA sanctions, state voters in 2012 finally rejected the name by a two-to-one margin).

The *New York Times* reported that that “ranchers and residents in the conservative, overwhelmingly white countryside view the protests with a mix of frustration and fear, reflecting the deep cultural divides and racial attitudes in Indian country.” It noted that Sheriff’s officers were escorting the local school bus, and quoted a Morton County Commissioner as suggesting that the Native “protesters” might “set fire” to ranchers’ hay reserves. After Governor Jack Dalrymple declared a “state of emergency”, one rancher claimed to a TV reporter that he “had confrontations with protesters.”

One rancher later actually accused the water protectors of killing livestock with “bows and arrows,” but he had his own history of livestock theft, and just happened to be locked in a legal dispute with LaDonna Allard.

On August 17, the State Patrol set up a Traffic Control Point roadblock, or TCP, on State Highway 1806 that prevented access to the camps to all but local residents, and functioned as an economic blockade of the reservation. The TCP was equipped with military-style klieg lights and concrete roadblocks.

Other TCPs were later set up on highways 6 and 1806 to restrict access to what agencies called the “protest area.” The war zone-style checkpoints isolated the camps from Native supporters, but also had the--perhaps calculated--effect of discouraging white North Dakotans from joining or even seeing the camps, and

causing them to blame the water protectors rather than the authorities for their long-distance, 50 or 60-mile detours to go to the grocery store, medical appointments, and so on. Some local residents criticized the roadblocks, but most pointed fingers at Native people for the 45-minute detours.

Like in Ferguson, local sheriff’s departments have been armed with surplus military equipment from the Iraq War, and transformed into quasimilitary units. As this cartoon shows, Barney Fife has been turned into a pipeline company SWAT member.

The Standing Rock crisis was also federalized, with FBI, National Guard, and TigerSwan private security contractors fresh from Iraq and Afghanistan.

There would be no better ways to prevent a Cowboy Indian Alliance in the Petrostate of North Dakota than to fast-track the pipeline, demonize the water protectors,

and prevent potential local whites who also opposed the pipeline from even reaching the camps, and turn others to blaming the tribe rather than the state for impeding their free movement. To this end, the state spent at least \$22 million in security costs. In effect, the extractivist state may have been proactively learning lessons from previous setbacks in Nebraska, South Dakota, and elsewhere. Future water protectors will have to adjust their strategies accordingly, such as once more against KXL.

Keeping communities divided involves not only driving wedges between them, but keeping them unequal in power, and preventing them from seeing a common future together.

I experienced the Camp as a “liberated zone,” a community of thousands that fed itself,

danced together,

and celebrated every time another tribal bus arrived.

It reminded me of the Survival Gathering, and included veterans of the earlier alliances.

If white landowners had visited the spiritual camp in larger numbers, they could also sense its peaceful and positive expressions.

My sense was that the state also realized this possibility, and was alarmed at the prospect.

Wondering if the roadblock was in fact devised not only to impede Native people, but also potential non-Native allies in North Dakota, I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to four agencies, asking them for internal communications on the rationales for setting up the roadblocks, and policies for diverting vehicles. The agencies were the Governor’s Office, National Guard, Highway Patrol, and Morton County Sheriff’s Department.

This was the second time I’d written to these agencies; the first was when I co-authored an open letter to National Guard and law enforcement in North Dakota, along with Winona LaDuke and retired Army Colonel Ann Wright, urging them to disobey illegal orders to attack civilians. We did hear of a few examples of refusals by police officers, and more notably sheriff’s departments in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Montana that faced so much dissent that they pulled their forces out of North Dakota. But because of this letter, I didn’t expect much information from the FoIA request. So far I’ve only heard back from the Highway Patrol

which sent 51 pages of documents, so I’m able to make some preliminary observations. I wasn’t so much interested in the clashes at the roadblocks later in September through February, which have been so well publicized. I was interested in the original rationales for the TCPs, and the Rules of Engagement that they established even before the full-scale militarization began.

The TCP was established on State Highway 1806 on August 17th, just as the Standing Rock crisis was hitting the national media.

The North Dakota Department of Emergency Services’ Homeland Security State Radio, ensuring a “safe and secure homeland for all North Dakotans” issued talking points about the roadblock, under its arrowhead logo. Its rationale focused on public safety, given the presence of “protesters” and parked vehicles on the roadways, and keeping the road open for emergency vehicles.

Highway Patrol talking points assert that “local residents had expressed concerns about traffic hazards.” They claimed that the roadblocks were “put in place for the safety of those protesters on the roadway.”

The Highway Patrol press release, emblazoned with its headdress logo, also pointed to the real traffic hazards, but failed to explain why alternate forms of traffic control, such as those for large concerts or sporting events, were not used instead of roadblocks.

On August 26, Colonel Michael Gerhart acknowledged that concerned Highway Patrol employees had given him an “earful” criticizing the roadblocks. He replied to them that “Until we have control over protesters marching up the road whenever they choose, we will continue to maintain the traffic control point. Seeking that control through diplomacy versus force is the best course of action but takes time.”

Four days later, Gerhart was rethinking the TCPs, proposing that instead speed bumps near the camps would be a more practical solution. That sensible suggestion was apparently rejected by his higher-ups.

Lieutenant Thomas Iverson briefed officers staffing the TCPs not to talk so much with the public: “Try to keep them moving, Don’t provide an interview to motorists passing through.”

Patrol commanders constantly had to tighten restrictions on who was allowed through the TCP, such as disallowing a Standing Rock transit bus.

And refusing to let ambulances through unless they were directly involved in an emergency call.

On September 8, after state negotiations with the tribe, the TCP was changed into a “Traffic Information Point” that no longer blocked access but briefed motorists on possible hazards. It was staffed by National Guard Military Police as a “huge force multiplier” that freed up patrol officers, and gave a visible militarized imprint to the roadblock.

Police still had to be present to make any arrests, since military personnel could not, but they were told to remove their nametags.

Other TCPs that did restrict access were set up throughout the fall and winter, including at the infamous Backwater Bridge site of numerous clashes, up to the February 22nd evacuation of the camps.

These TCPs reinforced the image of the so-called “protest area” as a war zone. The TCP at top was in North Dakota, and the one below was in Iraq—and it’s hard to tell the difference. The use of militarized forces not only served to intimidate water protectors and chill their rights to free speech and assembly, but deterred others from joining them.

None of this happened in the Keystone XL pipeline struggle, though maybe it will now. It’s not difficult to see why a fourth Cowboy Indian Alliance was stillborn in North Dakota. Even if they opposed DAPL, the white farmers and ranchers would not unite with tribal opponents under these polarized, militarized conditions.

But the Native and white neighbors did not have to visibly unite, because the Native “water protectors” are already fighting for the common good.

Identity politics, also called “particularism,” emphasizes differences between human beings, such as nationality and culture.

Unity politics, also called “universalism,” emphasizes the similarities between people, such as economic equality or environmental protection.

Most white Americans usually assume that particularism stands in the way of universalism, and that we should “set aside” our differences to unite around common ground. Yet from what I’ve seen and studied in *Unlikely Alliances*, the stronger that Indigenous nations assert their cultural and political distinctiveness, the stronger is the bridge ultimately build with their rural white neighbors.

A victory for Native sovereignty and treaty rights can also safeguard the natural resources that white neighbors use,
so it’s in their interest to join with Native nations to protect them,
challenge the oppression and entitlement of settler colonialism, and move toward decolonization on the ground.