

Dear Antioch,

The tragic murder of George Floyd and the ongoing protests around our country have once again exposed the deep roots of systemic racial injustice and white supremacy in our nation. My hearts break for my African American friends as I follow these stories through the news and social media, but if I'm really honest, as someone who lives in Bend, Oregon, I feel pretty far removed from the whole thing. As a white pastor of a predominately white church in an overwhelmingly white city, it's easy to feel like this isn't really an issue that involves me. But maybe that's exactly the problem. Maybe the fact that I can check in and out of this conversation at will means I'm way more tangled up in this mess than I realize.

The following is an updated version of article I wrote several years ago. It's not intended to provide answers for how to get involved in fighting racism. There's much to be said about that, but I don't tackle that question here. Instead, I'm simply giving a brief history of race in Central Oregon. Understanding our own story is essential if we're going to engage an issue as important and complex as race in America. We may be surprised at what we find.

Next Sunday, June 7, our digital liturgy will be an invitation to consider our complicity in the reality of racism and our responsibility to listen to, learn from, and love our brothers and sisters of color who are hurting so badly right now. I hope that you'll join me on this journey as we seek the reconciling power of Jesus to heal our broken hearts and our broken nation.

Yours in Christ,

WHY IS BEND SO WHITE?

THE STORY OF CENTRAL OREGON'S PREMEDITATED UNIFORMITY

Pete Kelley

The Decemberists have just taken the stage at Les Schwab Amphitheater. Outfitted with a Patagonia jacket and a pint of over-hopped IPA, I slowly survey the clamoring crowd around me. My Irish-German mug blends perfectly into the sea of pale faces spread across the lawn on the west bank of the Deschutes. As Oregon's legendary lit-rock heroes break into their opening number, I'm struck by the realization that this might be the whitest thing I've ever done.

Welcome to beautiful Bend, Oregon. We live for the outdoors. We love our rivers and trails, craft beers and coffee. We've escaped the hustle Orange County, Seattle, and San Francisco to slow down in a safe, scenic town in the high desert. And, yes, we are white. 92% white, to be exact. Compared to our national population which is composed of 37% racial minorities, only 8% of Deschutes County identifies as non-white.

Have you ever wondered why Bend is so white? Why aren't there more people of color in our city? Why haven't more minority communities been established? Why hasn't our green-hearted state, which famously sits near the top of any list of "stuff white people like", become a place that red, brown, yellow, and black people like too?

The harsh reality is that Bend's whiteness is no accident. Oregon's history is marked by oppressive laws and race-based restrictions which have deliberately prevented non-white communities from taking root in our great state. To get the full story we need to start at the beginning.

THE FIRST CENTRAL OREGONIANS

Ancestors of the three American Indian tribes which now live on the Warm Springs Reservation, located an hour north of Bend, are believed to have occupied our area going back at least 11,000 years.

Paleolithic peoples crossed the Bearing Ice Bridge, migrating from Asia into North America in search of game. With the extreme weather fluctuations in Central Oregon, native tribes are thought to have used the area seasonally more than as a permanent residence. Natives traveled into the region in the spring and summer months to harvest roots and berries and to hunt deer, elk, and other animals sought for skins and hides.

During the Age of Discovery, from 1565 to 1815, epic mortality swept the globe. Epidemic diseases from Euro-Americans wiped out massive percentages of native peoples. Small pox, measles, malaria, influenza, and the infamous *Oregon Trail* dysentery reduced the state's indigenous population by more than 80%. This massive blow to the native tribes would play a major factor in the surrender of their lands to the U.S. Government when Oregon became an official territory in 1848.

FREE LAND! (AS LONG AS YOU'RE WHITE)

Two years after the Oregon Territory was established, the Oregon Land Donation Act promised 320 acres to any white adult male, resulting in an influx of settlers claiming ownership of native land. By 1855, all but 540,000 acres of the millions of acres of "Middle Oregon" were ceded to the United States government through treaties which demanded the tribes be located to reservations. Being outnumbered

and outgunned, the native people were forced to comply. So while towns were being founded all over the Oregon Territory by idealistic farmers, loggers, ranchers, and miners, the federal government created the Warm Springs Indian Reservation as a solution to their “Indian Problem”.

A WHITE UTOPIA

As a child who grew up in Oregon, I was taught to be proud that our state did not permit slavery, unlike much of the Southern states prior to the Civil War. While the territory of Oregon expressly forbid slavery, there is more to the story. The goal for those who were coming out West was to create opportunity to whites, without competition with slave labor. Because of this, Oregonians had a distaste for anyone who was not white. While early Oregonians voted against permitting slavery within the territory, 89 percent of those same people cast their vote in favor of excluding black and mixed race people from the state altogether.

It’s not a stretch to say that Oregon was created as a white utopia. Recruiting materials invited Midwestern settlers to come to the Oregon frontier and build the white homeland of their dreams. In order to create this white utopia, people of color were forcibly discouraged from settling in Oregon in a number of ways:

- In June 1844, Oregon instituted the infamous “Lash Law” requiring that blacks in Oregon be whipped twice a year “until he or she shall quit the territory.”
- In 1848, Oregon’s provisional government passed the Exclusion Law making it unlawful for any Negro or Mulatto to reside in Oregon Territory.
- A new Exclusion Law was added to the Oregon Bill of Rights in 1857 stating: “No free negro, or mulatto, not residing in this State at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall come, reside, or be within this State, or hold any real estate.
- In 1859, Oregon was the first (and only ever) state admitted to the union with an Exclusion Law written into the state constitution. Although the Exclusion Law was not always strictly enforced state-wide, it had the intended effect of discouraging black settlers. The 1860 Oregon census reported only 128 African Americans in a total statewide population of 52,465.
- In 1862, Oregon adopted a law requiring all Negros, Chinese, Hawaiians, and Mulattos residing in Oregon to pay an annual tax of five dollars. If they could not pay this tax, they were forced into service maintaining state roads for 50 cents a day.

- Interracial marriages between Negroes and whites were banned and in 1866, Oregon citizens voted to forbid granting citizenship to Negroes.

Though these Exclusion Laws were rendered moot by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, they were not repealed by Oregon voters until 60 years later.

This means that it was illegal to be black in Oregon until 1926.

WHEN THE BUTTE CATCHES FIRE

Outspoken racist sentiment continued on into the 20th century. In 1921, at the height of the Ku Klux Klan, 15% of white male Americans were card-carrying members, while Oregon had the highest per capita membership. The Klan was highly influential in the Oregon political structure, influencing legislation and police, and strategizing the institution of compulsory public education with the express purpose of indoctrinating students with white supremacist views.

Here in Bend there were at least 350 registered members of the KKK who regularly staged public rallies and parades through the main streets of our downtown. E. D. Gilson, the former Mayor of Bend (1921-22), was at one time the local Exalted Cyclops, or chief officer, of the Klan. On multiple occasions in the 1920s hooded Klansmen set crosses ablaze on the top of Pilot Butte broadcasting their message of white supremacy to all of Central Oregon.

These attitudes were heartily embraced and openly communicated by 1920s Bendites. Storefronts throughout the city displayed signs reading, “White Trade Only!” “No Japs Allowed!” and “No Dogs, No Indians!” Bend, along with many cities throughout Oregon, became known as a “Sundown Town.” Non-whites were allowed to come and conduct business during the day, but were required to be out of the city limits by sundown, “or else.”

A WHITE SUPREMACY SUCCESS STORY

This brings us back to today. How should we, as white Bendites enjoying concerts and kayaks in our beautiful city, respond to the story of Bend’s premeditated uniformity? I know I used to think that since there are so few people of color in our town, the fight for racial justice isn’t really relevant to us. But I’m learning that the exact opposite is true. Our largely mono-racial makeup is the direct result of an intentional strategy to ensure the whiteness of our city. In other words, Bend is a white supremacy success story.

In Oregon, white supremacy isn't an ideology; it's a fact. Throughout the history of our state, the white race has reigned supreme. Please don't misunderstand. This isn't the way it should be, but it is the way it has been and continues to be.

The plaguing question is, "So what can we do about it?" There is much we can do, but I would argue that a critical first step in living as responsible citizens is to pursue a shared understanding of history. As white Oregonians, we will never truly know what it's like to be a person of color, but we have a moral obligation to acknowledge that we arrived in Bend on a road paved with policies and provisions that were designed specifically to benefit people who look like us. From there we can grow into a community marked by compassion, empathy, justice, and love - stewarding our privilege to seek the common good of all people, everywhere.

Note: Much of the historical research for this article comes from Premeditated Uniformity, an excellent documentary on Oregon's racial history directed by Kip Jones. It can be found at <https://vimeo.com/230854021>.