

Prologue Transcript and Show Notes: Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley

Title: “What you do, and what you don’t do”

[00:00:00]

Audio Recording of Judee Burr, 30 June 2021:

[Soft music begins¹]

It is Wednesday, June 30, 2021. There are aggressive wildfires burning east of Kelowna right now.

[00:00:16]

Montage of News Clips, many voices:

There are currently more than 6,100 properties under evacuation order.

This fire continues to grow ...

Do you feel like they’re getting it under control at this point? Hard to say.

[00:00:30]

Audio Recording of Judee Burr, 30 June 2021:

I got here, um, just, like a month ago, I guess? Then quarantined for two weeks ...

[00:00:39]

Narration, Judee Burr:

If you were in the Okanagan last summer, this might sound familiar. I moved to the Okanagan last June, June of 2021, just in time for a record-breaking heat wave. It contributed to one of the biggest fire seasons this valley has experienced in the last century.² What you’re hearing is a recording I made as I heard the news of those fire events.

[Soft music continues]

[00:01:04]

Audio Recording of Judee Burr, 30 June 2021:

Yeah, so, we’re in the middle of a historic heat wave. Apparently, it’s the hottest it’s ever been in the city of Kelowna.

[00:01:15]

Narration, Judee Burr:

Fires started in rapid succession across the province of British Columbia and around the Okanagan. July 10, Becker Lake. July 11, Thomas Creek. July 13, White Rock Lake. July 14, Brenda Creek. July 19, Nk’Mip. August 15, Mount Law. August 28, Skaha Creek. September 3, Hedges Butte.³ I read the news on my computer when, just a few hours away in British Columbia, most of the town of Lytton burned down.

[Drumming music begins]

The fire moved so quickly that residents had less than 30 minutes to leave. Two people died. Lytton had experienced the highest temperatures ever recorded in Canada for three days prior to the fire.⁴

[Music ends]

[00:02:06]

Audio Recording of Judee Burr, 30 June 2021:

I'm looking at other headlines – "Village of Lytton, BC evacuated as Mayor says the whole town is on fire." "Time-lapse of wildfire smoke east of Kelowna, BC." "A wildfire has broken out on the south side of Highway 97C near Trepanier Road."

[Pauses]

[Soft music begins⁵]

So ... it doesn't look good.

[00:02:45]

Narration, Judee Burr:

These were all "interface fires," wildfires occurring where forests and neighborhoods meet. Thousands of people in the Okanagan Valley were evacuated. The White Rock Lake fire burned more than seventy homes in Monte Lake, along Westside Road, and on Okanagan Indian Band land.⁶ Even where I live in downtown Kelowna, the smoke from fires around the valley infiltrated. I packed my first just-in-case evacuation bag uncertainly and left it by the door. I hid inside from the heat wave and smoke. It felt like a privilege to have the protection of my air purifier and AC, as if these technologies could erase the unsettling heat and fire realities for a while. As the fires burned, I felt lucky to live away from the forest edge, where decades of unburned material carried the fires towards homes.

[Music ends]

Here's my recording again:

[00:03:42]

Audio Recording of Judee Burr, 30 June 2021:

And I'm not sure how normal any of these are. And I've read all about the positive ecology of fire and yet, my first time living through a fire season in the worst heatwave the Pacific Northwest has ever recorded ... it still scares me. It's still a fear response.

[Ominous music begins⁷]

And, I live in the middle of downtown Kelowna so I assume things are safe right now, I assume I'd hear sirens or get a phone call or whatever. But maybe that's not even true.

[00:04:22]

Narration, Judee Burr:

When I began to learn about where and when fires happened in the Okanagan Valley over the last century, I saw what a change the last two decades of wildfires have been – a burst of aggressive burning after long decades of little fire.⁸

[Music ends]

I wanted to learn more about the history of fire here – about people using fire on the land, and about people's experiences living through wildfire threats. The idea that this Okanagan landscape is connected to fire – even “maintained” by it⁹ – can be difficult to hold in communal memory when the absence of fire is widely celebrated. Most of us experience fire predominantly as a summer threat that we'd rather do without.

[Music begins with the sounds of cymbal and then guitar¹⁰]

[00:05:11]

Narration, Judee Burr:

Conversations about living with fire are happening globally, but fires happen locally in highly specific ways. They are affected by particular geographies, cultures, and structures of power, policy, and management.¹¹ I wanted to learn more about fire in this specific place, the Okanagan Valley. I'm new to this Valley – and maybe you are too. The Okanagan is one of the fastest growing regions of British Columbia today, and millions of tourists visit during the summer – which is also the height of wildfire season. This academic podcast is shaped by my questions and conversations as a newcomer to this place, trying to get to know this fiery home. What does it mean for people to live well with fire here? What has it meant?

[Guitar music continues]

[00:06:01]

Narration, Judee Burr:

My name is Judith Burr. Most people call me Judee, and I use she/her pronouns. This is my thesis project. I am a master's student in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies program at UBC Okanagan, in the Digital Arts and Humanities theme. The digital humanities are a relatively new world of academic scholarship –

[Music ends]

that celebrates the use of digital tools for research and knowledge sharing. This field of study has allowed me to apply digital tools to researching and communicating fire stories from in and around the Okanagan Valley.

[00:06:36]

Narration, Judee Burr:

I have been interested in audio stories and podcasting for a few years now. I have been exploring quite a few audio story possibilities, and I have interviewed a lot of my friends and family for all kinds of podcasts that I haven't finished yet. I want you say to you, if you're one of those people I've interviewed, thank so much for helping me learn about this process – how to tell audio stories and what I can and cannot do alone. This digital arts and humanities program has given me the support I needed to connect with other people practising podcasting and complete this as my thesis project.

[Upbeat music begins¹²]

[00:07:13]

Narration, Judee Burr:

I have also been curious about ways of using fire and living with fire for some years now. I became interested in local histories of people and fire when I was an undergrad student at Stanford University, back in 2012. I was a research assistant then, at the Bill Lane Center for the American West, where our Comparative Wests project welcomed me into learning about Indigenous fire stewardship and the politics of its implementation in communities in Australia and California.¹³ This was a formative project. I soaked in the stories, experiences, and lessons of fire management and cultural burning that people shared with me. Even after I graduated, it was difficult to stop thinking about the challenges of living with fire and putting good fire back on the land. It was difficult to know what to do with the importance of those stories.

[Upbeat music continues]

[00:08:06]

Narration, Judee Burr:

This podcast brings many of my experiences and interests together with an active need I'm hearing circulating around the Okanagan Valley and beyond – a need to improve the ways we live in and manage this fire-prone landscape.

[Music ends]

These episodes centre on fourteen interviews I conducted in person and over Zoom with people who understand fire through scholarship, management, Indigenous fire stewardship, and other kinds of experience across what many of us now call British Columbia. I reflected with each of my interviewees about the Okanagan specifically, but their experiences and knowledges extend beyond it. So, what you'll hear is not neatly bounded as an Okanagan Valley story.

[00:08:45]

Narration, Judee Burr:

You'll hear stories of cultural burning and prescribed burning, stories of living through wildfire events, stories of fighting fire, stories of managing ecosystems with an

awareness of fire's role here, and more. I see all of these as ways of knowing about fire, through study and experience. I see power in bringing multiple kinds of fire knowledge together. Although I narrate parts of these episodes to share the connections I'm making from the interviews and my background research, I don't think there is just one way to hear this. Sharing this research in a publicly accessible format is a way of inviting you, listener, into these conversations, into the practical work of building a healthier life with fire in the Okanagan, or whatever fire-prone landscape that you call home.

[Music begins¹⁴]

[00:09:30]

Narration, Judee Burr:

I created this work on the unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan people. As we will hear, Syilx Okanagan knowledges and land care practices have so much to do with creating a sustainable life with fire here. Dr. Jeanette Armstrong is a Syilx Okanagan Elder and Knowledge Keeper and Canada Research Chair in Okanagan Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy. I have been listening to her work. One quote in particular jumped out at me in the context of my research. When asked to define sustainability in an interview in 2007, Armstrong responded – quote - “one of the things in our community is that it isn't something that is theorized. It is always something that is practical, and something that is understood in terms of what you do, and what you don't do.”¹⁵ End quote.

[Music continues]

[00:10:22]

Narration, Judee Burr:

The fire knowledges and stories you will hear come back to *practice* again and again. What do we value in our fire-maintained landscapes? And how are we putting those values into practice on the land?

[Music continues]

[00:10:36]

Narration, Judee Burr:

The history of wildfire and the history of people using fire in this valley is old, older than all of us listening. These dry interior landscapes of bunchgrass and ponderosa pine and saskatoon berries, of bighorn sheep and deer, of hot, dry summers and cold winters, and of *people* entangled in all of it – these have been in community with fires for thousands of years. The way fire moves across this landscape continues to change with our choices about *what to value and how to practise those values* in this place.

[Music continues]

[00:11:11]

Narration, Judee Burr:

There's a way for each of us to contribute to a healthier home with fire here. I'll share a few ideas – like making our homes fire smart, or being more tolerant of spring and fall smoke so light burns conducted by Fire Keepers and Burn Bosses can go forward. But I think I'm asking questions with this work that everyone who lives in this valley and everyone who loves it here will have to help figure out. This podcast is a beginning, not an end.

[Music changes¹⁶]

[00:11:40]

Narration, Judee Burr:

One final note: I did these interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic and some of the audio quality is less than stellar. I included clips from those conversations anyway because I think the interview content is important, even though you might have to listen a little more closely. Many of the interviews I conducted will be archived on my thesis project website – listeningtofirepodcast.ca – and you can listen to the full interviews there.

[Music ends]

Show Notes

- ¹ "Aloscape 2" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/111570>.
- ² Aseem Sharma, Piyush Jain, Mike Flannigan, and John Abatzoglou, "Perspectives on the June 2021 Heatwave and Wildfires," 2 June 2021, <https://www.canadawildfire.org/heatwave>; Kathy Michaels, "32 Okanagan Residents Died from Heat Wave: BC Coroner's Office," *Global News*, 1 November 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8340607/okanagan-residents-died-heat-wave-bc-coroners-office>.
- ³ BC Wildfire Service, "Wildfires of Note," accessed April 2022 at <http://bcfireinfo.for.gov.bc.ca>.
- ⁴ "BC Coroners Service Confirms 2 Deaths in Lytton Wildfire," CBC News, 3 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lytton-wildfire-sat-update-1.6089367>; David Ball, "B.C. Admits Communications with First Nations during Lytton Fire 'Didn't Live up to Expectations'," *CBC News*, 4 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-first-nations-communications-gaps-1.6089869>.
- ⁵ "Aloscape 2" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/111570>.
- ⁶ Chad Pawson, "Dozens of Okanagan Residents Cope with the News Their Homes Have Been Lost to Wildfire," CBC News, 17 August 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/dozens-of-okanagan-residents-cope-with-the-news-their-homes-have-been-lost-to-wildfire-1.6144478>.
- ⁷ "Access Road 138" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110672>.
- ⁸ "Fire Perimeters – Historical," Statistics and Geospatial Data, BC Wildfire Service, available at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-statistics>.
- ⁹ Ellen Simmons, "British Columbia's Indigenous People: The Burning Issue," *Journal of Ecosystems and Management*, FORREX Forum for Research and Extension in Natural Resources 13, no. 2 (2012): 1–2; Don Gayton, "Fire-Maintained Ecosystems and the Effects of Forest Ingrowth," *Province of British Columbia Ministry of Forests, Nelson Forest Region*, December 1996.
- ¹⁰ "Lady Lupine" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110671>.
- ¹¹ As one example of the vibrancy of place-specific fire knowledge, Indigenous fire stewardship knowledge is highly specific to places and an active form of good fire use in those places: Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (Sydney: Hardie Grant Travel, 2020); Jared Dahl Aldern and Ron Goode, "The Stories Hold Water: Learning and Burning in North Fork Mono Homelands," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 26–51. Also, scientific studies of fire history often make the point that local or ecosystem-specific understandings of fire history are important for planning how best to manage fire-prone landscapes: Emily K. Heyerdahl, Ken Lertzman, and Carmen M. Wong, "Mixed-Severity Fire Regimes in Dry Forests of Southern Interior British Columbia, Canada," *Canadian Journal of Forest Research* 42, no. 1 (January 2012): 88–98; Alexandra Pogue, "Humans, Climate and an Ignitions-Limited Fire Regime at Vaseux Lake" (master's thesis, Department of Forestry, University of British Columbia, 2017).
- ¹² "Begrudge" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110670>.
- ¹³ Judee Burr, "Re-Kindling the Flame: Indigenous Communities and Fire Management Collaborations in the United States and Australia" (bachelor of science honours thesis, Department of Earth Systems, Stanford University, 2012); Judee Lena Burr, "Burning Across Boundaries: Comparing Effective Strategies for Collaboration between Fire Management Agencies and Indigenous Communities in the United States and Australia," *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 5 (2013).
- ¹⁴ "Our Only Lark" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110679>.
- ¹⁵ Jeanette Armstrong, *Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Jeannette Armstrong (Sylx)*, transcript of interview by David Hall, 2007, retrieved from the Native Perspectives on Sustainability project website: www.nativeperspectives.net.
- ¹⁶ "Lady Lupine" by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/110671>.