In the center of the Glacier Peak Wilderness in northern Washington, a magnificent, fully glaciated white volcano rises over a stunningly beautiful region. On maps, the mountain is called Glacier Peak. To the Salishan people who have always lived in this part of the Cascades, the name is Dakobed, the place of emergence.

For the better part of a century, a small three-sided log shelter stood in a place called White Pass, tucked securely into a meadow between thick stands of mountain hemlock and alpine fir. The shelter was a seasonal ranger post, a place of refuge for hikers and climbers. The weight of winter snow and the events of time had left its mark, and the shelter needed to be replaced.

In the early fall of 1976, while working as a seasonal ranger for the United States Forest Service, I drew the task of burning the shelter. All of its years, the shelter roof had collapsed like a broken bird wing under the weight of winter snow, and the timewas right for fire and replanting. It was part of a Forest Service plan to remove all human-made objects from wild places, to allow nature to take its course. And so I backpacked eleven miles to the pass and set up camp, and for five days, while a bitter early winter storm howled driving precipitation out of die north, I dismantled the shelter and burned it.

The shelter stood on the shoulder of the Great Mountain, locked securely into a meadow below. A small three-sided log shelter stood in a place called White Pass, just below one shoulder of the Great Mountain, where timbered slopes meet the meadow below. The shelter was a place of refuge for hikers and climbers, and for the better part of a century, it stood as a symbol of the wilderness that the Salishan people who have always lived in this part of the Cascades, the name is Dakobed, the place of emergence.
nothing remained. The antique, hand-forged spikes that had held the shelter together had rotted away, and the shelter itself had been wrecked by the wind. There was only a pile of splintered wood and slates, the spikes distorted and mingled with snow and ice. I had expected to find a place to rest, a place to think. Instead, I found nothing but devastation.

I started to walk away, but the sisters held me back. "Where will you go?" one of them asked. "We live here. This is our land. We own it."

I hesitated. It was easy to feel guilty for my own actions, to feel sorry for the shelter, but I also knew that the sisters' story was not my story. I knew nothing about their history, their culture, their land. I was an outsider, a foreigner in their home.

"I'm Indian, too. Choctaw from Mississippi; Cherokee from Oklahoma," I said, trying to make a connection.

"We been coming up here each year since we was little," one of the sisters added. "Except last year when Sarah was not well enough."

"A long time ago, this was all our land," the other sister said. "The one called Sarah's land." "Our father built a little home where we went while hunting. The snow and wind made it stark, but it was a place we went to in times of need."

I wanted to excuse myself, to beg the sisters to leave me alone, to go back to the trailhead and my car, to drive south. I wanted to say, "I'm Indian, too. Choctaw from Mississippi; Cherokee from Oklahoma."

But I couldn't. I knew that my actions were not my own, that I was part of a pattern of loss that the sisters knew well.

"Burning the Shelter" by Louis Owens
Louis Owens

native ancestors all over this continent lived within a complex web of relationships with the natural world, and doing so they assumed a responsibility for their world that contemporary Americans cannot even imagine. Unless Americans, and all human beings, can learn to imagine themselves as intimately and inextricably related to every aspect of the world they inhabit—unless they can learn what the indigenous peoples of the Americas knew and often still know—the earth simply will not survive. A few square miles of something called wilderness will become the sign of failure everywhere.