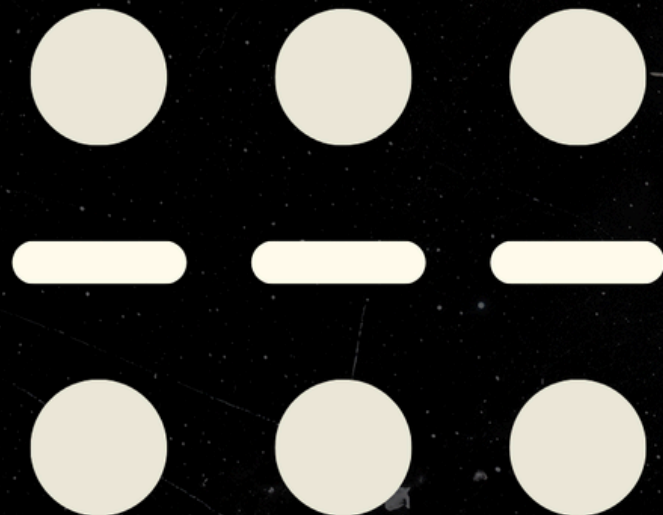


different places
same patterns



from the ground
through struggle



dispatches from
the rural edge



sabotmedia
we never left

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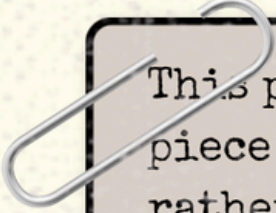
GRAYS HARBOR SOS

IF YOU ARE READING THIS
THE SIGNAL REACHED YOU

SABOT.MEDIA

Research informing this article includes work

- from:
 - Washington University in St. Louis, The Divide Between Us: Urban-Rural Political Differences Rooted in Geography
 - University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy research on the rural-urban political continuum
 - Cornell University research on rural-urban political polarization and demographic sorting
 - Stanford University research on geographic political realignment and representation



This publication is intended as a piece of movement journalism rather than an academic review. The research cited here is offered to support and contextualize years of on-the-ground reporting and organizing in Grays Harbor and conversations with organizers working under similar conditions elsewhere.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

This report draws on several years of original reporting by Sabot Media on housing, homelessness, labor, mutual aid, local government, and economic development in Grays Harbor County, including:

- WHO IS TERRY EMMERT?
- REPORT BACK ON THE COLD SNAP
- NO COLD WEATHER SHELTER FOR ABERDEEN, WA
- DENIED SHELTER
- DESPITE COURT RULING, CITY OF ABERDEEN REFUSES TO FIND ADEQUATE SPACE FOR HOMELESS ENCAMPMENT
- HISTORY OF THE HARBOR'S HOMELESS
- AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CITY OF ABERDEEN
- RED HARBOR: THE IWW IN GRAYS HARBOR, WASHINGTON

This report also draws upon interviews and conversations conducted by Sabot Media with organizers, researchers, and mutual aid projects, including discussions with Food Not Bombs chapters from Texas to Gaza, organizers across the Pacific Northwest and the rest of the country, and academics studying rural political geography and polarization.

TRANSMISSION RECEIVED

"The county estimated between 500 and 3,000 unhoused people. The shelter had 25 beds."

We told our friends we would check back on them in the morning and left them out in the snow. Two were dead by morning. We lost a dozen friends that winter.

Those numbers have been rattling around in our heads for years.

Not because they are dramatic.

Because they were true.



FIELD REPORT

COUNTY POPULATION

78,144

ESTIMATED UNHOUSED

3,000–5,000

SHELTER BEDS AVAILABLE

25

LIVES LOST

12+

WINTER

2021

LOCATION

Aberdeen, WA. Grays Harbor County.

Sources: The Daily World, Chehalis River
Mutual Aid Network, and County reports

THE SIGNAL IS **ALREADY** BEING SENT.



The question is whether we continue
concentrating our movements in the
same places as wealth and power, or
whether we begin building them in the
places those forces have spent decades
abandoning.

EVERY COUNTY.
EVERY VALLEY.
EVERY TOWN.

WE'RE STILL HERE.
WE'RE STILL BUILDING.

Read the full article at sabot.media

WHAT WE NEED

For decades, wealth, institutions, media attention, political power, and organizing infrastructure have all concentrated into the same metropolitan centers. Too often our movements have followed the same path. The result is that enormous portions of the country are treated as recruiting grounds, campaign stops, or abstractions rather than places where lasting movement infrastructure should be built.

That concentration is not inevitable. It is a choice. Grays Harbor, WA is sending an SOS.

So are communities throughout Appalachia, on the Navajo Nation, across the Delta, in former timber towns, mining communities, agricultural regions, and hundreds of places that rarely appear in movement strategy discussions except as abstractions.

- ☐ Fund rural media.
- ☐ Support rural organizers.
- ☐ Build relationships outside metropolitan centers.
- ☐ Visit.
- ☐ Report.
- ☐ Collaborate.
- ☐ Share skills.
- ☐ Send money.
- ☐ And when it makes sense, move.



THE DETAILS DIFFER. THE LESSONS RARELY DID.

Over the past several years Sabot Media has reported on housing, labor, mutual aid, homelessness, absentee landlords, shelter closures, development schemes, and local government failures. We have spoken with organizers from Texas to Gaza, from academics studying political polarization to Food Not Bombs chapters feeding people every week, and with people struggling to survive in places that rarely receive national attention.

The details differed. The lessons rarely did.

During a Food Not Bombs roundtable discussion, organizers from Miami, Houston, West Palm Beach, Aberdeen, and elsewhere described dramatically different local conditions but remarkably similar challenges. The recurring problems were rarely ideological. They were practical.

When there are only six people willing to do the work, purity becomes a luxury. Relationships become infrastructure. Reliability becomes political. The question stops being whether everyone shares identical politics and becomes whether they will show up next week.

Rural ————— Working Definitions —————

Peripheral communities with lower population density, fewer institutions, fewer organizers, fewer resources, and greater distance between people. They often experience high needs but receive comparatively little attention or investment.

Urban

Major metropolitan areas with high population density, overlapping organizations, greater institutional capacity, more media attention, more funding, and a much larger concentration of organizers and movement infrastructure.

The history of labor in Grays Harbor tells a similar story. Long before today's housing crisis, workers built unions, fought timber barons, organized through the Industrial Workers of the World, and resisted concentrated economic power well into the 80's. The Harbor has never lacked people willing to fight. It has often lacked the infrastructure needed to sustain those fights across generations.

That distinction matters. The problem facing many rural communities is not political apathy. It is organizational scarcity. There are people willing to do the work, but not always the resources to support them. For years Sabot has documented the consequences of that scarcity. The purpose of this zine is not to prove those consequences exist. They already do. The question is what we intend to do about them.

Grays Harbor does not need sympathy. It needs solidarity. So do all your rural comrades.

Not because these communities are uniquely deserving, but because they are attempting to solve enormous problems with remarkably few resources. A thousand dollars given to a large urban organization may barely register. The same thousand dollars can transform what is possible for a small rural project. The same is true of media attention, legal support, technical skills, research, transportation, design work, and human labor. In places shaped by scarcity, every resource travels farther.

If you believe rural communities are important, allocate resources accordingly.





Grays Harbor offers a useful example of what scarcity looks like in practice. A handful of organizers often find themselves working across multiple projects because there simply are not enough people. The same people coordinating mutual aid may also be reporting local stories, attending city council meetings, supporting tenants, organizing events, distributing supplies, and maintaining relationships between groups that would otherwise have little contact.

This is not unique to the Harbor. The difference is that rural communities have fewer institutions to absorb the pressure. When something breaks, there is often no larger organization waiting to step in.

The work falls to whoever remains.

The details differ. The pattern remains.

In Aberdeen, organizers spent years fighting over shelter beds, encampments, and basic survival while developers and politicians promised future solutions. During our Food Not Bombs roundtable, participants from dramatically different places kept returning to the same problems: too few volunteers, too little money, too little time, and too much work. Whether the conversation happened in Texas, Palestine, Florida, Washington, or elsewhere, the geography changed. The conversation did not.

Developer Buys Up Harbor

Portland millionaire Terry Emmert has acquired more than 60 properties in Grays Harbor County.



WHERE DID EVERYTHING GO?

The jobs went somewhere.

The investments went somewhere.

The political attention went somewhere.

The people went somewhere.

The wealth certainly went somewhere.

What remained were the consequences.



TRANSMISSIONS RECEIVED

ABERDEEN
"No storage."

HOUSTON
"We need drivers."

MIAMI
"Volunteer burnout."

GAZA
"Food first."



COMMON PATTERNS:

Too few people.
Too little time.
Too much work.

SCARCITY POLITICS

RURAL REALITY



SIX PEOPLE



TEN ORGANIZATIONS



EVERYONE WEARS
TEN HATS

URBAN REALITY



100 ORGANIZERS



ONE ORGANIZATION



EVERYONE
SPECIALIZES

Grays Harbor is not unique.

That is precisely the problem. When Portland developer Terry Emmert began acquiring properties throughout Grays Harbor County, local residents learned a lesson familiar to rural communities throughout the country: some of the most important decisions affecting your town can be made by people who do not live there.

Years ago we wrote:

"So long as Terry Emmert maintains the illusion that he is investing into our city and 'fixing' these properties up, he is allowed to use them as tax shelters."

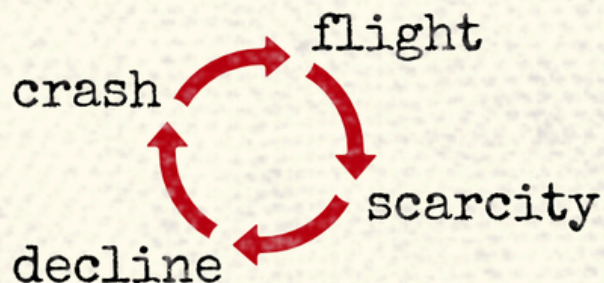
Part of the reason is scarcity.

Cities operate under conditions of organizational abundance. There are more organizations, more activists, more events, more meeting spaces, and more opportunities to participate. That abundance creates opportunity, but it also creates fragmentation. When dozens of organizations share the same ecosystem, ideological distinction becomes a way to differentiate one group from another. Rural communities face a different reality. The challenge is finding six people willing to consistently show up.

There is a weekly community meal I attend at a park in the city, at the time that it starts there are usually roughly 3-4 other organizations in the park at the same time also doing various forms of food distribution. They do not coordinate. - Seattle based anarchist

Under conditions of scarcity, reliability matters more than political precision because reliability is far harder to find. Organizers quickly learn that ideological sorting is a luxury. Coalition building becomes a necessity.

This scarcity is reinforced by decades of brain drain. Young people leave for jobs, education, healthcare, culture, and opportunity concentrated elsewhere. Organizers leave because that is where movements appear to be happening. Resources and networks follow them.



Whether one agrees with every detail of that assessment is beside the point. The larger question remains: why does a developer living nearly two hundred miles away possess so much influence over housing conditions in a county he does not call home?

Every rural community has its own version of this story. A developer. A corporation. An investment fund. A mining company. A timber company. An absentee landlord. The names change. The industries change. The dynamic remains.

People often describe places like Grays Harbor as forgotten. That is not quite right. Forgotten implies nobody is paying attention. The reality is stranger. Rural communities are often intensely connected to the broader economy. Resources flow out. Wealth flows out. Young people leave. Decisions are made elsewhere. Have you have had similar experiences?



The profits go somewhere.

The debts stay.



The consequences stay.



Housing is only one example.

For years, local debates around homelessness in Grays Harbor have followed a familiar pattern. People living outside are moved from one location to another. Encampments are cleared. Vehicles are tagged and towed. Temporary solutions are proposed. Long-term solutions are promised. The conversation is forgotten. The crisis remains.

At various points local governments have spent more resources debating where unhoused people should not exist rather than where they should. During winter storms, organizers and mutual aid groups repeatedly found themselves attempting to fill gaps that entire well-resourced institutions seemed unable or unwilling to address. The numbers changed from year to year. The underlying problem did not.



Saul Alinsky
1909-1972

Saul Alinsky, a mid-20th century community organizer known for developing practical strategies for building grassroots power among working-class communities, understood something many organizers still struggle with. People rarely organize around theories. They organize around problems.

We have known these people.

A parent worried about rent who rejects every radical label but shows up to tenant meetings anyway. A logger who bristles at the word anarchist while talking for hours about absentee ownership and distant bureaucracies. A church volunteer who spends every weekend feeding hungry neighbors and insists they have no politics at all.

Then someone introduces a label. Suddenly the conversation changes. Not because the values changed. Because the label entered the room.

This presents anarchists with a challenge. If our goal is genuinely to build popular power, are we more committed to our values or our branding?

Many of the people who could become our closest allies will never encounter anarchism through a book or a social media post. They will encounter it through a food distro, a tenant campaign, a labor struggle, disaster response, a community garden, or a mutual aid network. They will encounter it as a practice long before they encounter it as a label or political theory.

The farther one moves from major metropolitan centers, the more obvious this becomes, as more and more of the people who show up are often not political radicals.

THE LABELS DIFFER. THE CONDITIONS OFTEN DO NOT.

Research Note:

Research increasingly supports this observation. Studies from Washington University in St. Louis suggest that proximity to major metropolitan centers and population density are among the strongest predictors of partisan identity. Other researchers have found that political attitudes frequently exist along a continuum rather than a simple rural-urban divide. Geography appears to shape political labels far more than many organizers assume.

But labels are not values.

That distinction matters because many radicals, including anarchists, often organize backwards. We begin with identity. We ask whether someone is an anarchist, socialist, conservative, liberal, progressive, or leftist before we understand what they actually believe.

Sources: Washington University of St. Louis



Housing Costs



Stagnant Wages



Inaccessible Healthcare

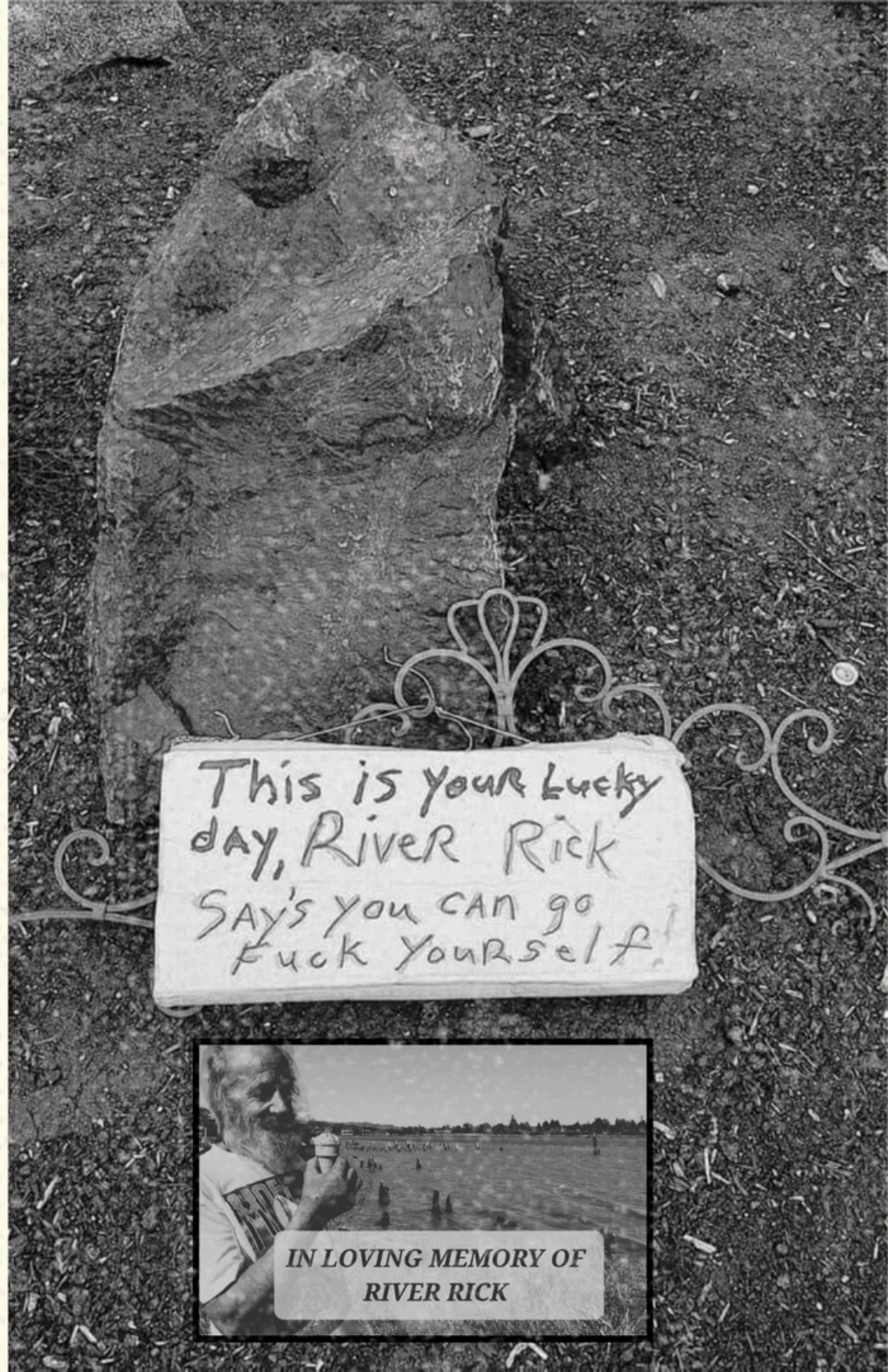


Childcare Expenses



Decisions Made Elsewhere

Same Problems. Different Zip Codes.



This is your lucky
day, River Rick
Say's you can go
Fuck Yourself!



IN LOVING MEMORY OF
RIVER RICK

THE MYTH OF THE RURAL DIVIDE

The dominant story about rural America is usually cultural.

En masse rural people vote differently. They watch different television. They drive different vehicles. They worship in different churches. They use different political labels. Entire industries now exist to explain these differences.

Yet after years of reporting and organizing, we have become increasingly convinced that these explanations miss something important.

GOOD PEOPLE AND ASSHOLES ARE DISTRIBUTED REMARKABLY EVENLY ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE.



We have worked alongside evangelical church volunteers, union members, anarchists, recovering addicts, old-fashioned veterans, curious teenagers, cop-loving queer liberals, conservative loggers, fishermen, teachers, and people who could not explain the difference between a socialist and a socialite if their lives depended on it. Some became trusted comrades. Some became obstacles. All turned out to be far more complicated than their labels suggested.

One worker may distrust corporations while the another distrusts government. One may fly a pride flag while the other covers their truck in incoherent bumper stickers. Yet both may be struggling with housing costs, stagnant wages, inaccessible healthcare, childcare expenses, and the growing sense that decisions affecting their lives are being made somewhere else.

The labels differ.

The conditions often do not.