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## Honoring Carrie Dann

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*Honoring the Legacy of Carrie Dann,  
Newe Land Defender*

By Debra Harry, Ph.D.



Native Pulse Short Feature: Carrie Dann



The Indigenous world mourns the passing of Newe (Western Shoshone) rights defender, Carrie Dann. Her fierce resistance and determination to protect her Indigenous rights has inspired generations of Indigenous rights activists, environmentalists, women, and human rights protectors around the nation, and around the world. The Western Shoshone struggle has long been an important element of the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples' project portfolio. In fact, the project was supported by the predecessor of the Fund, the Tribal Sovereignty Program, which was founded and led by Cayuga/Salish visionary Daniel Bomberry in 1977. The Western Shoshone Defense Project continues to be an affiliate of the Fund today.

Carrie Dann maintained a principled and uncompromising stand to protect her peoples' treaty rights by virtue of the Treaty of Ruby Valley of 1836. The Treaty, ratified by Congress, is a peace and friendship treaty that outlines Western Shoshone territory, and allows for the peaceful passage of Americans across their lands.

In the 1950s, the US government established the Indian Claims Commission, an extrajudicial entity that sought to pay \$26 million for 24 million acres of land purportedly

lost by “gradual encroachment,” amounting to approximately \$1.05 per acre. The traditional Newe rejected and fought against this claim for decades, stating their Mother Earth was not for sale. In 1974, the US Secretary of Interior accepted the Indian Claims Commission funds as ‘trustee’ of the Newe. In 1986, the US Supreme Court decided that the Secretary’s action constituted payment to the Newe for their lands.

Meanwhile, the US Bureau of Land Management charged the Dann sisters with trespassing on their own land, and deployed a series of roundups to seize of the Dann’s livestock, utilizing helicopters, semi-trailer cattle trucks, and hired hands in a heavily militarized fashion, on the pretense that the Dann’s were degrading the land with their livestock. In the same breath, BLM continued to grant mining permits to global corporate giants like Barrick Gold, Newmont Mining Corporation, and numerous other mining companies that leave mountain ranges razed, and virgin water aquifers pumped dry in their wake. In addition the military expanded operations across their treaty lands including the establishment and expansion of air bases, nuclear testing, and proposed storage of nuclear waste.

While this legal history is complicated, the governmental harassment, contradictions and falsehoods were clear. The Newe positions were upheld by the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, a treaty body that implements the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, a convention that the US endorsed and ratified in 1994. The UN-CERD took exception to the US government’s claim that the “Western Shoshone peoples’ legal rights to ancestral lands have been extinguished through gradual encroachment “when the Western Shoshone continue to use and occupy their lands according to traditional land tenure. The Committee further noted concern that the US position is made on the basis of processes before the Indian Claims Commission, “which did not comply with contemporary international human rights norms, principles and standards that govern determination of indigenous property interests,” calling into question the very legitimacy of the Indian Claims Commission.

Carrie knew that her treaty rights, and right to live peacefully in her homelands, were positions based on both a moral and legal high ground. According to the US Constitution (Art. 6, clause 2), “treaties shall be the supreme law of the land,” and requires very specific actions to change the terms of such a high-standing contract, none of which have ever taken place. The US government has been in violation of the Treaty, and hundreds of other treaties made with Indigenous Nations, as if the

“supreme law of the land” could be simply waved away. In one of the films made on the Western Shoshone plight to defend their homelands, *To Protect Mother Earth – Broken Treaty II* (1991), Carrie said, “I remember one time I said to my father why do you trust these people, He said, a man is supposed to honor his words, otherwise those words would not be uttered from his mouth. That is the way our people were at the coming of the white people. They honored their words, And, yet on the other side words were uttered. They were never honored.”

The Norway-based Right Livelihood Foundation awarded the Right Livelihood award to Carrie Dann and her sister Mary (1923-2005) “...for exemplary courage and perseverance in asserting the rights of indigenous people to their land” in 1993. The Right Livelihood Award was established in 1980 to “honour and support courageous people solving global problems” and is commonly referred to as the alternative Nobel Peace prize.

Carrie stood strong, never compromising her right to be and to live as Newe in her homelands. She and her family endured decades of governmental harassment, abuse, and legal maneuvers that were designed to strip the Newe of their rights to their land. This harassment literally stole any chance for them to truly live a happy life, even as they became elder grandmothers. Still, those of us who were privileged enough to spend time with Carrie, and the Dann family over the years, know that she stayed humble, worked hard, was quick to laugh, and enjoyed the company of so many people who supported them and their cause.

Carrie truly exemplified what it means to be a good ancestor. Her life, her actions, and sense of responsibility was dedicated to the wellbeing of future generations: “Being a good ancestor means taking care of the land, the air the water, the necessities of life so the future generations may have something. That to me would be being a good ancestor. Taking care of something not for yourself, but for the future to come.” We can honor Carrie’s legacy by living by these words.

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Carrie Dann's name:***

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Carrie and her sister Mary Dann pictured smiling together.



*Your contribution supports our purpose for existence and collective responsibility to promote self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and sovereignty of Native nations.*

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