

(Intro music)

Nina Pullano: Welcome to Sidebar, a podcast from Courthouse News. You know we say that to kick off almost every episode and we're all very happy being part of Courthouse News and Sidebar – the smaller part and the greater whole. But this is not always true when it comes to residents in states who don't feel like the overall statehood is something that represents them – between political divides, cultural differences and even the climate – the way that state lines are drawn just doesn't cut it for some. Kirk McDaniel is going to take us on a road trip through the various movements by folks who feel like they've come up with a solution: to secede from the state altogether. First up: Greater Idaho. It's not Oregon, it's not Idaho, but a more complex and not-so-secret third thing. Here's Kirk.

Kirk McDaniel: Admitted into the United States in 1890, the state of Idaho has long been a rural outdoor oasis for farmers, hunters, hikers and those just looking for a simpler way of life. But for people living just beyond the state's western border in eastern Oregon, Idaho looks like a haven from the liberal politics that dominate the Beaver State.

Matt McCaw: In Oregon, because the numbers are so vastly weighted to the west side of the state, because of the Portland metro area, whatever the west side of the state wants, politically, is what happens for the whole state. My name is Matt McCaw and I'm the spokesperson for the Greater Idaho movement.

KM: Greater Idaho is a grassroots organization with the goal of moving the Idaho state border to encompass eastern Oregon.

MM: Most people agree we have a partisanship problem in our country, we have these two different cultures that really want to live life differently than each other. But what do we do about that?

KM: The answer? Instead of continuing to play a losing game, why not just leave the table? Go play with someone else. Someone who shares your values, political beliefs. Go play with Idaho.

Alanna Madden: I would say that compared to other parts of the United States, Oregon is very laid back. The culture is kind of, I don't know if the right word is earthy. And it's kind of the way of life out in Oregon and Pacific Northwest in general.

KM: To get a better idea of what life is like in Oregon and what's driving the Greater Idaho movement, I called up a fellow Courthouse News reporter.

AM: My name is Alanna Madden. I cover mainly the federal courts, here in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Montana and Wyoming.

KM: Alanna is a native Oregonian and a keen observer of both big cities and rural communities. She told me that she first heard about Greater Idaho in 2020. Since then, she has watched as the movement has grown and people begin to take it more seriously.

AM: At the time, when I was reading comments online, a lot of people thought it was a joke. Or that, you know, it was just ridiculous. So, I think that since then it has picked up some momentum in the sense that I think it's gone a lot further than people thought it would.

KM: So, what makes east Oregon different from west Oregon?

AM: Well, eastern Oregon is definitely more of a desert climate all the way through, and it gets drier the more east you go. Western Oregon has a lot more lush forest that you see. A lot of valleys, a lot of like grassland, a lot of farms. The climate is a lot more wet out here in the western part of the state. I mean, the way of life out in rural Oregon is a lot different than urban Portland. It's a lot slower, the industries are different, the jobs are different. A lot of small communities are really centered around churches, for example.

KM: What Alanna is describing is something known as the urban-rural divide. The urban-rural divide is something that you have likely heard of before. It is where urban areas like big cities tend to be more open to liberal policies and ideas. Rural areas on the other hand are more receptive to conservative ideas. This is a phenomenon that has been tracked for over a hundred years just within the United States and can be found in developed nations such as the United Kingdom, France and China. This divide has only widened over the past few decades in the United States, bringing people like Matt McCaw to believe that people would be better off redrawing the map to reflect these conflicting ideologies.

MM: The idea of borders is to group similarly minded people and like-minded people and similar cultures, and where our borders are currently no longer are providing that function. In fact, it's just the opposite. Where the border is between Oregon and Idaho is not where the cultural divide is between the two areas. The border between Idaho and Oregon was placed there 164 years ago. When that line was drawn 164 years ago, there were less than 50,000 people living in the state of Oregon. They put that line there for a reason. It made sense to put it where they did at that time. But 164 years later, where that line is, is not making communities better. It's actually causing problems because it's grouping cultures and peoples together that want very, very different things out of their state government.

KM: For McCaw, the pandemic led him to get active and mobilize in support of eastern Oregon secession.

MM: Covid, for me, personally, and what happened in the state of Oregon during the pandemic, it was one of those crystallizing events that said, OK, government can have a massive amount of control over your life. If it has that much control over your life, you better make sure that that government is the kind of government that you want and matches your values.

KM: McCaw and supporters of Greater Idaho are looking for a sense of representation that they feel is lacking in Oregon. As mentioned before, the state is considered a Democratic stronghold. The state has had a Democratic governor since 1987. Additionally, the state hasn't gone for a Republican in presidential elections since 1984. Compare that to Idaho, where Republicans have carried the state in presidential elections since 1968. Even at the state level, the differences could not be more clear. Republicans enjoy supermajorities in both the Idaho state House and Senate. And in Oregon, Democrats are just one vote shy from a supermajority in the House and Senate.

MM: We don't really have any say, and this is really the main crux, is that we are a political minority in our own state. And because of the numbers, we're talking about 9% of the population in eastern Oregon, it's 63% of the landmass, but we're only 9% of the population. We will never be able to out-vote the Portland metro area, it will not happen. So, whatever the Portland metro area decides, they can force that on the east side of the state, they can force it on communities that live hundreds of miles away.

NP: I have to say this is all making me think of my own experiences as a lifelong New Yorker – and by that, I mean the state of New York. I grew up in western New York, where my dad’s family roots are – about a six-hour drive from New York City. And the vibe is culturally a lot more Great Lakes-y than anything else. You’re bonded by massive snowstorms, the Buffalo Bills and hyper-local specialty dishes. My hometown, Rochester, we have one called the garbage plate. It’s kind of our claim to fame and it’s essentially a beautiful mess of a cookout plate with special hot sauce. It’s meant to be enjoyed after 2 a.m. That’s just one of many pockets in the state, and to folks in each of those communities, what they have is unique and distinct from other parts of the state. But my mom grew up in Manhattan, and to her, anything above The Bronx was the vague and vast land of upstate New York. You see that mentality all the time down here – “oh, upstate, I think they have a bunch of trees up there, perhaps some mountains as well.” So, it’s similar to what we’re talking about in Oregon – and I think you definitely see this play out when voting time comes. This deep blue state on a map actually looks pretty damn red, but the super dense population down here in New York City overwhelms the electorate. So, people like Matt McCaw I think are bound to feel some type of way about that. Kirk, Matt talked about the pandemic crystalizing the idea to do something pretty extreme to change that imbalance. But there seems to be more to it with state secession. I mean, is that really a new idea that sprung up a couple years ago? I feel like we fought a war over this at some point.

KM: This is certainly not a new idea. This is something that has been around for many, many, many years and I think more to your point, secession, just the word alone brings up these ideas of the Civil War, of the Confederacy. It always gives people this sort of strange feeling, but I do think it’s important to make the distinction from what Greater Idaho is trying to do from what many people associate with the word secession. There are groups out there that are looking to leave the union entirely. Here in Texas, probably to nobody’s surprise, there is a group called the Texas Nationalist Movement and they are looking for outright secession from the union. Greater Idaho, on the other hand, is looking to secede from a state to join another state. Nobody is looking to quit the union.

NP: OK, fair enough, pretty big difference between those two. So, when it comes to state secession, what else is out there?

KM: Well, you may be surprised that there is actually quite a few movements out there and they span a very long history. One in particular is the State of Jefferson. Greater Idaho’s vision for seceding is in no way a novel idea. Throughout the modern era, secession movements have popped up all over the United States. Some of them are strikingly similar to the goals of Greater Idaho. In the late 1960s, there was a campaign to have New York City secede from upstate New York, making the region which consisted of Long Island the 51st state in the union. There have been small-scale attempts to have the eastern part of Washington state secede from the western half and become the State of Lincoln, after the 16th president.

Peter Laufer: There's a swath of northern Colorado, it's again this urban-rural business that doesn't feel like Boulder and Denver represent who they are. There's the State of Superior, which is the upper peninsula of Michigan, northern Wisconsin, northern Minnesota. I think we can find these most places around the country.

KM: That is Peter Laufer, a journalist and professor of journalism at the University of Oregon. In 2013, Laufer published a book about one of the longest-enduring secession movements in the country: the State of Jefferson. Ever heard of it?

PL: The elevator pitch on the State of Jefferson is that it is counties, mostly rural environments in Northern California and southern Oregon, that historically, since the 19th century, have envisioned themselves as somehow not part of the Sacramento-based, Salem-based sense of Oregon and California, but rather are something else individual. And that has resulted in an embracement of the State of Jefferson conceptually and then a movement that believes, and they are completely wrong, that there actually could be a 51st state that would be a State of Jefferson.

KM: Now the name of the state, Jefferson, comes from the founding father, Thomas Jefferson. The movement's roots go back over 80 years and have a quite interesting origin story. To set the stage, people living in rural Northern California and southern Oregon began talking about seceding from their respective states and forming their own state. A chief grievance many of them voiced was that they felt forgotten by politicians who failed to advocate for their basic needs, including at the time having properly maintained roadways. Then, just before the U.S.'s entrance into World War II, the movement got a huge boost in publicity.

PL: A reporter, Stanton Delaplane, came up from the San Francisco Chronicle and he wrote a series of articles that so added to the mythology and the locals played to, he was essentially the director, and they played to his suggestions of what to do for photography for their statements, which he helped draft, to the public and to the citizenry. And then Pearl Harbor occurred, and all of this went by the wayside for a time. However, Delaplane won a Pulitzer Prize for his fiction, although he didn't win it for fiction, he won it for news reporting. And that may have been in part because those columns provided some relief to the tension building up to the attack on Pearl Harbor in the U.S. involvement in World War II. And then, it has resurfaced in recent times, around the period when I wrote the book, the "Elusive State of Jefferson," which was about a dozen years ago, when I started researching it.

KM: The State of Jefferson lives on in the modern era. If you find yourself traveling through Northern California, you may pass the town of Yreka, the proposed capital city for the State of Jefferson. Driving along Interstate 5, you will see bicycle shops, gun stores, restaurants and motels all carrying the Jefferson moniker.

PL: The public radio station in the southern part of Oregon, in the northern part of California, bills itself, brands itself as Jefferson Public Radio, it's an embracement of a positive sense of regionalism.

KM: Some residents of the region opine on how the area would be better off as the 51st state and continue to this day to advocate for secession in many ways similar to the Greater Idaho movement. Professor Laufer told me that secession movements gives people a shared sense of identity and further drives the urban-rural divide as both sides seek to move further into their own corners.

PL: It plays the positive for a sense of identity because we all want a sense of identity. You're in Austin, and it depends on what neighborhood you live in in terms of what kind of an Austin identity you present to yourself, your friends, to me, to your audience, that's all dependent not just on Austin, which has its own identity worldwide, but within Austin, where you hang out, what restaurants and bars you go to, where you go fishing. I marked a place in the book here, which is one of my favorite couple of lines, if you will indulge me, because it speaks to this identity. And this occurred down in California. And I had just come back from Mexico, and I went with a colleague, another reporter, I traveled with in Mexico and we went to, we were in Fairfax, which is a village of about 5,000 in Marin County in California. And we ate at Fradelizio's Italian restaurant. And while we were eating owner Paul Fradelizio showed up, and

as is his style stopped at our table to say, hello. "How are you?" I asked him. "Fine, now that I'm back home in Fairfax," was his answer. The obvious follow-up question was to find out about his travels, it sounded as if he had just returned from distant lands. "Where were you?" I asked. "San Rafael," he said, "and I always feel so much better as soon as I crossed the line into Fairfax." San Rafael is the county seat just three miles east of Fairfax. So, these kinds of micro identities, one might call them, are always at play as we try to figure out who we are. Where it becomes problematic is when you then get the extreme red, blue divides in something like the Greater Idaho movement, where that which is, in my mind, counterproductive to us as a society starts to be in play, and people talk about why they do not want to interact with fellow citizens.

NP: OK, so, traditionally we have our municipalities, our states, our country. Is it fair to say that this kind of regionalism kind of transcends the formal lines that we've drawn? Like, it seems like it's not so much about bridging divides, but creating new ones, different ones.

KM: Yeah, I mean absolutely, I think that's why what surprised me with this topic was just how the urban-rural divide can be traced through many of these secession movements.

NP: Right, sure, it makes sense that those cultural lines wouldn't follow those rigid, sort of legal, political lines that we've drawn. I mean, it's a really intriguing idea, whether or not you agree with states seceding, redrawing these lines. Tell me, Kirk, how likely is it that these secession movements take off? I mean, are we going to have to add an extra star to the American flag any time soon?

KM: Well, I will tell you there is probably more likelihood of Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico of being that new star. The road to success for Greater Idaho or, say, any of these other movements, it's got a long road ahead. The writing on the wall for Greater Idaho spokesman Matt McCaw is that there is no possible way for eastern Oregonians to get the representation they want. So, instead of trying to fight a seemingly unwinnable political battle, why not just move the border? But how would you do that? How does it work?

MM: The first step for us was to prove that there was popular support.

KM: Starting in 2020, eastern Oregon counties have voted on whether secession is something they would like to pursue. In the most recent election this past May, voters in Wallowa County, right on the Oregon-Idaho border, voted in favor of Measure 23-007. The measure posed this question to voters: "Shall Commissioners meet twice annually to discuss promoting Wallowa County's interest in relocating Idaho's borders to include Wallowa County?" The counties that have voted in favor of having their local elected leaders voice interest in moving the border, is just the first of many steps.

MM: So, our approach was to go county by county in eastern Oregon and ask voters directly. We've been doing that for the last two and a half years. There's 15 full counties we're trying to move into the governance of Idaho, 11 of those counties, voters have said yes, we want to pursue this, we want our elected leaders to pursue it. The process again, and I don't want to get bogged down on process, but the process is actually not that complicated. The process is two state legislatures come together, they decide where it would make sense to move a border to, or put a state line. And then they write up the contract language that talks about how that would go.

KM: It's like a divorce. The two states will have to negotiate out who takes what and how the assets get divided.

MM: But the two state legislatures are going to negotiate those things out. There's state prisons, there's a state university, they're gonna say, "OK, what are we doing with this? You know, is this going to go with those people? Is there going to be any money exchanged? You know, what's going to be grandfathered in?" There's going to be issues that have to be resolved, but that's what will happen between two state legislatures and will go into the interstate compact.

KM: The settled contract stipulating how the division takes place would be drafted into what is called an interstate compact, basically a contractual agreement between two states. However, interstate compacts have to receive final approval from the U.S. Congress before going into effect. Look, I can already hear you. "But Kirk, Congress doesn't get anything done these days!" Despite the gridlock, McCaw is optimistic that if an interstate compact gets sent to Congress, Greater Idaho is in the bag.

MM: Historically, Congress has tended to approve these. If a blue state and a red state come together, and they say we want to move our line because where it is isn't working and we think it worked better for both states if it was here, there's really no reason for Congress to say no. And especially, again, one of the reasons why this makes so much sense for the state of Oregon is that we're not talking about a lot of people. There's nothing sacred about these lines. These lines should be updated. You don't have to update them every two or three years. But 164 years later, it's time to retake a look at this.

KM: Observers of the Greater Idaho secession movement believe that, just like the State of Jefferson, it's destined not to reach its goal. Take this opinion article headline from the Idaho Statesman for example, "Greater Idaho is a pipe dream, a symptom of a deeper problem: the urban-rural divide." I wanted to learn more about why the article's author thought the movement was a pipe dream, so I called him up.

Bryan Clark: My name is Bryan Clark. I'm an opinion writer with the Idaho Statesman. I've been a journalist in Idaho for, oh, nine years now, 10 years, something like that.

KM: Clark told me that, in his view, Greater Idaho is a childish proposal.

BC: So, within this context of a nation that is divided between its rural areas and its urban areas, there's this ever increasing – and it takes a number of different forms, Greater Idaho is just one of them – this idea that if we can just redraw the borders, then we can live exclusively with people who share our beliefs, who we believe are part of our common community as opposed to our cultural enemies, and that's what I think is ultimately childish. I think we're stuck with each other.

KM: Now it's one thing to disagree with a proposal like Greater Idaho, or even the idea of secession, but it is another to call it outright impossible.

BC: When discussing the Greater Idaho phenomenon, I think one trap that it's important not to fall into is to think that this is something that's likely to happen. Because it's not.

Norman Williams: I think it's fair to use the term impossible. This is not going to happen. I'm Norman Williams, I'm the Ken and Claudia Peterson Professor of Constitutional Law at Willamette University where I teach constitutional law and election law. For it to happen, there would need to be three different things to take place. First of all, the Oregon Legislature would have to approve it. The Idaho Legislature, and equally importantly, the people of Idaho would have to approve it, because it would

require a constitutional amendment in Idaho. And then third, and finally, Congress and the president would have to approve it. And that's not going to happen either.

KM: Like Bryan Clark, Professor Williams wrote an opinion piece sharing his perspective on why the movement will fail. Starting off, Williams sees no chance the Oregon Legislature will even come to the table on this issue.

NW: No one really wants to be the person who votes for turning over 80% of the landmass of Oregon to a different state. The Oregon Legislature has shown absolutely zero interest in even talking about this. There was a measure introduced in the Oregon Senate this past January. The measure was modest in the sense that it wasn't endorsing this, it just said it was authorizing the state to begin discussions with Idaho, and that measure went nowhere.

KM: OK then, but what about the Idaho Legislature?

NW: As for Idaho, the Idaho Legislature just this past year took up the same question, should they begin discussions? In fairness, the Idaho House of Representatives approved the measure. But what was striking to me was not that the House approved it, it's that the Idaho Senate entirely ignored the measure after the Idaho House approved it. And even the representatives who voted in favor of it expressly said in the floor debate of "Hey, this is great. It wouldn't cost us anything." Well, that's just not true. I have, in previous kind of back-of-the-envelope calculations, said that Oregon would expect to be paid somewhere between \$12 and \$20 billion for transferring all of the state assets and shares of kind of pension assets and its share of the debt that the state debt and pension debts that Idaho would be expected to either assume or pay.

KM: Well... I guess that only leaves Congress.

NW: Finally, Congress. Why would Congress oppose this? Well, the impact is really the presidential election. So, in shifting eastern Oregon to Idaho, you switch one presidential elector from reliably Democratic Oregon to reliably Republican Idaho. Now you may say one presidential elector in the Electoral College is not that big deal. But again today, given how partisan our politics are, I don't see why Democrats in either the House, in the Senate, or the Democrat in the White House that we have currently, will be willing to cede even one Electoral College vote from the Democratic column to the Republican column.

KM: Aside from getting this effort passed through the respective political bodies, Williams also told me that eastern Oregon may take a financial hit. Specifically, in the legal weed market.

NW: Oregon, unlike Idaho, has legalized marijuana and cannabis projects. There are a number of dispensaries, marijuana dispensaries, in eastern Oregon cities – Baker, Ontario – that are thriving right now. Well, you may ask, why are they thriving? Well, it's because we think that Idahoans, where marijuana is illegal, are driving across the border to get their supplies from the marijuana dispensaries in eastern Oregon, which, again, are making a lot of money disproportionately to dispensaries in central Oregon. Well Oregon taxes those dispensaries and sales, and those taxes go to fund local schools and law enforcement. And so interestingly enough, on the close to the border, people have been far more reluctant to embrace this in part because I think they've recognized, and they've said so in the newspaper reporting on this, that if they became part of Idaho, that would require the elimination of the marijuana dispensaries, which are now a sizeable source of tax revenue.

KM: While the cards may very well be stacked against Greater Idaho, Williams believes that the movement should still be taken seriously. It is worth mentioning that while today's conversation is about Greater Idaho, a similar movement could pop up elsewhere in the country.

NW: This is not unique to Oregon, as you just noted, this is a phenomenon that's taking place in every state in the nation, which is an increasing partisan divide in which many individuals of one party don't feel a connection with, don't feel much sympathy for individuals in the other party.

KM: It would be foolhardy to say that there is a solution to our current urban-rural divide that plagues the nation. In exploring movements such as Greater Idaho and the State of Jefferson, I can understand why one might find the chance to rewrite the map attractive. No one likes feeling like their vote, their voice or their experience is not being heard.

NW: And again, it's going to sound somewhat Pollyannish, but I think that the takeaway here is not to dismiss the Greater Idaho movement or similar movements in other states as just a bunch of crazies who are pursuing something that will never happen. The latter is certainly true, it's not going to happen, but they're not crazy. They have legitimate grievances and they're right to feel marginalized. But the solution that they've identified is not the real solution to that problem, any more than it's a solution to tell them, "Well, if you want to be in Idaho move to Idaho." This movement is, again, it's a symptom of the divisions and partisan polarization that's taking place everywhere in America. But the solution to that is to try to redress the division, not to accentuate it by saying, "Well, let's just make those divisions deeper by drawing the state border somewhere else."

KM: Movements such as Greater Idaho and the State of Jefferson challenge the notion that our nation, the way it looks on a map and on the ground, is not set in stone. At the same time, they highlight something that seemingly is and that is as long as there are cities and farmland, there will be an urban-rural divide. Let's just hope they learn to communicate better before the divorce papers get pulled out. I want to thank everyone who spoke to me for this episode. I also want to give a special shoutout to Alanna Madden, Courthouse News' boots on the ground in the Pacific Northwest. Make sure to follow her on Twitter @AlannaMaddenPDX to stay up to date on these stories and more.

NP: You know what they say: "If at first you don't secede, try, try again." I've been saving that one. Thank you, thank you for listening and please remember to follow us wherever you've been picking up the podcast. You can drop a nice little review if you've been enjoying it – it really helps us out. Next time we're joined by a special guest – New York City reporter and sometimes radio DJ Josh Russell. You've heard of lawsuits over copycat songs – think of the big "Blurred Lines" controversy, or the more recent lawsuit that accused Ed Sheeran of ripping off "Let's Get It On" in his 2014 ballad "Thinking Out Loud." As musicians will tell you, there are only so many chord progressions that are possible to create, so overlap is bound to happen, again and again. But we're going to take it a step further, to where one unique element, namely a distinctive rhythm, makes up the very bones of a musical style. Like the dembow beat you're hearing right now that we've come to know as reggaeton. If you claim you came up with it first, can you then copyright an entire genre? We can't wait to share what we've learned. See you then!

(Outro music)