

A Brief History of Citizens for Healing by Dallas Cook

Citizens for Healing (C4H) is a local group of Lake County residents who came together to change the name of the town of Kelseyville to Konocti.

Although not formally organized, the group of individuals has worked effectively together toward their common cause. They were self directed, they identified their own skills, they determined how they could use them to help, and proceeded forward, always staying in communication with each other.

C4H first met on Indigenous Peoples Day, October 12, 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their meetings were held in Pioneer Park in Kelseyville for the first several months. They began to Zoom their meetings early on. When the weather became too extreme, indoor venues were secured for in-person meetings, so as many people as possible could be included.

The last time efforts were made to change the town's name to Konocti was about ten years ago. But for various reasons the process was not completed. So, from the start C4H wanted to be clear that Konocti would be the appropriate new name - acceptable to all the communities around the lake, especially the tribal nations in Lake County.

Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs) from three different tribes Zoomed the early meetings. They explained that each tribe had distinctly different languages. Konocti is the name of the mountain in the language of the East Lake Tribe of Elem, the oldest existing tribe in the area. After a year, with many lively and informative discussions at the monthly meetings, Elders from all seven tribes approved the use of the name Konocti.

Outreach and publicity would be vital to the success of C4H's goals:

1. To educate people about the "real" history of Lake County in the late 1800s and reveal the true character of Andrew Kelsey, the man after whom the town is currently named
2. To inform people of the intent to change the name of Kelseyville and explain the process
3. To get input and support from the community

C4H scheduled and hosted community meetings at various locations around the county - in parks, tribal meeting halls, churches, and at other venues. Articles sent to the local media notified the public of the time and location for each month's meeting.

Finding available and affordable meeting space was difficult. Two local tribes provided space to C4H at no cost (the Habematolel in Upper Lake in August 2022, and the East Lake Tribe of Elem in Clearlake Oaks in October 2022.)

In March of 2021, Austin Murphy, a writer from the Press Democrat of Santa Rosa published a full feature story about the Citizens for Healing and their intentions to change the name of Kelseyville. Murphy's story included opposing views of the name change. Ariel Carmona, the editor of Lake County Record Bee, responded to the piece. C4H's own articles and press releases kept the community abreast of their upcoming meetings and scheduled events.

On April 24th, 2022, Citizens for Healing hosted a kick-off party at the Big Valley Hall in Finley. Publicized as a start to the political campaign to change the name of the town, there were scheduled speakers, a potluck, live music, and dancing. About fifty people signed the guest log and wrote comments, and many more were in attendance. The majority of the guests attending were supportive, with a few opposing the name change. Other curious folks were there just to learn about the history, and to find out why the name should be changed.

Several long-time residents of Kelseyville attended the June 2022 C4H meeting held in Kelseyville. The same people attended the meeting in Lakeport in July of 2022. This group of residents opposed the name change and said they wanted to see tribal members from the community at the meetings. They wanted to hear their stories and know the Tribes' position on the name change.

On August 14, 2022, they did indeed hear the tribes' stories. Elders and members from four different tribes attended the meeting held in the Tribal Hall of the Habematolel. They stood up, one by one, and spoke from their hearts, sharing stories they'd heard from their grandparents and great-grandparents. They talked about the difficulties growing up in Lake County. They spoke about the inter-generational trauma they still endure that is associated with the horrific history of Andrew Kelsey. Ron Montez, THPO for Big Valley, said "it wasn't really that long ago, it's still fresh in people's minds." And he felt that changing the name of the town would be a "gift to all the tribes." Only one person opposing the change got up to speak that day - he addressed the importance of education regarding our local history.

C4H believed originally that changing the name of a town was a political action, requiring a decision by the County Board of Supervisors, or a vote by the people. So C4H volunteers put great time and effort into preparing a measure to put on the ballot. They researched the time frames of the next election cycles and determined the number of signatures they would need to gather on their petitions to qualify. Using documents and literature supporting their case, they wrote draft after draft of the initiative for the ballot, explaining and justifying the name change.

This political road C4H was traversing took an abrupt turn at a special meeting held on November 2022 at Clearlake United Methodist Church. To a sanctuary filled with interested souls, Dr. John Parker presented "The Kelsey Brothers: A California Disaster" and the Rev. Clovice Lewis gave his sermon, "What's in a Name?"

During the spontaneous discussion that ensued after the presentations, several people in attendance stood up to speak. Among them was a retired attorney whose family roots go back to the original colonization of the area. What he shared came as a big surprise to everyone there.

He told the crowd that to change the name of an "unincorporated populated place" or town, like Kelseyville, simply required a proposal to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN). He explained (and C4H verified this later) that this Board is the Federal authority on names of places, serving under the larger umbrella of the United States Geological Survey (USGS). It arbitrates decisions on the naming and renaming of places.

C4H volunteers were relieved and encouraged at once. They didn't need to write an initiative to put on the ballot, they didn't need to launch a political campaign, and they didn't need to organize fundraisers for that campaign. But they could see that the work required in proposing a name change is similar to advancing a political appeal. C4H still needed to do plenty of community outreach, to build awareness and educate people, and to inform all the interested parties. Citizens for Healing have from the beginning been focused and committed to all these tasks.

At this writing, C4H volunteers are preparing the application to submit to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names proposing the name change. As recommended by the BGN, they have been reaching out to the "interested parties," such as the local Tribes, county and city government, local business associations, and community groups.