

The Continuity between the Old West and the New

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THE THESIS of this paper is very simple. In the context of the present miserable controversy among certain of my academic friends over whether the history of the American West was one of triumph or failure, Frederick Jackson Turner, the centerpiece of the brouhaha, was right, right, right and wrong, wrong, wrong, and the West, in all its images, guises, myths, and realities in which we perceive and conceive it, was—and continues to be—a triumph, as well as a mess of failures. In other words, it was—and is—both won and lost, depending on who you are and where you stand. Are you Ronald Reagan or are you that doomed pursuer of elusive dreams, drifting from one promise to another, and now standing helpless at Puget Sound on the edge of the continent surrounded by acres of clams?

As if fate understood that I had to assemble a few stories with which to launch into this premise, it provided me recently with a couple of telling coincidences that appeared to me rather interesting, as well as to the point. The first of these, one might say charitably, had to do with man's relation to the western land, one of my favorite themes. Last February, I was in Arizona, and I was watching the evening television news. An hour or so earlier, I had reread an account of the shenanigans of nineteenth-century western land speculators who rolled a portable, privy-sized structure from one land claim to another, leaving it at each place just long enough to win ownership of the land by satisfying the government that they had met the regulation requiring the establishment of a

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dwelling on their claim. Hard on the heels of my being reminded of this vignette of the winning of the West and the triumph of the conquerors over all obstacles, the television news program presented a stirring current example of somewhat the same sort of flimflam. It seemed that a 1991 Arizona tract-house developer had put one cow on his extensive property and thereby got his land assessed and taxed at the agricultural, rather than the much higher residential, rate. He was apparently still getting away with it, arousing more envy and admiration than condemnation. Both of these cases—the land speculators with their little house on wheels and the developer with his cow—although separated by a century in time, were winners, conquerors of the West with vision, enterprise, and a determination of steel—spelled both ways.

The second coincidence was different in nature, and in some respects more poignant. This time the locale for me was Rockford, Illinois, during a pre-Christmas visit. Several weeks before, while completing work on a history of the Civil War in the American West, I had discovered and used an 1863 quotation by a youthful member of the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, which, instead of being sent south to fight the Confederates, had been ordered to the western plains to protect the transcontinental communications and transportation routes from attacks by Indians. The young Ohioan had welcomed the assignment with bubbling enthusiasm. 'The West was new to us . . .,' he wrote. 'We were anxious to get on the road to the wild and romantic regions about which so many stories had been told.'

The poor man! Little did he know. During the following three years, he and his companions of the Eleventh Ohio came, saw, and, instead of conquering, got conquered. The strange, beautiful—but harsh and unsparing—western country swallowed up their cavalry columns, reducing them to dots on the landscape and taking from them all sense of dominion over their wild surroundings. On the stormy, windswept plains, in extremes of temperature

1. David P. Robrock, 'The Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry on the Central Plains, 1862-1866,' *Arizona and the West* 25 (1983): 29.

and climate, they knew little but misery, hardship, and death. They suffered from starvation, scurvy, frostbite, snake bite, blizzards, and sunstroke. They fought Indians almost constantly, and when they weren't fighting, they huddled, angry, lonely, and sometimes snowbound, in squalid shacks that went by the name of forts strung out in isolation across the silent land. Homesick, with a bellyful of the realities of the 'wild and romantic regions' that they had yearned to see, the survivors, who had little but the scalps left on their heads to show for their western sojourn, rode back to Ohio in 1866. Call them losers. You saw their types pictured in the film *Dances With Wolves*. They were the bad guys in blue uniforms, and it was true. Although they tried hard, they could not even win against the Indians.

And now the coincidence. In Rockford, with the young Ohio volunteer's joyous anticipation at the prospect of going west during the Civil War still fresh in my mind, I met a young man who, in a flash, caused the 128 years that separated him from the Ohio cavalryman to vanish as if they had not intervened. Learning that I owned a small ranch in a remote part of northeastern Oregon, he confided to me that although he had never been in the West, he was in love with it—with its adventurous history, its stories, its great, romantic personalities and events, its geographical mazes, its wildernesses, and its promises of freedom, clean air, clean water, and a generally wonderful quality of life. And then he added, 'I'm planning to go out there next summer. I want to become part of the Old West before it disappears.'

To one who is deeply attached to the American West, there is a certain solace and balm in hearing the expression of such a sentiment. But logic and the testimony of historians, truck drivers, flower children of the 1990s, and other realists would tell us that the youth was off his rocker, and I wanted to cry out to him, 'Oh, no! Hold on! You're making a mistake. You'll be humbugged. The Old West has already disappeared! It disappeared long ago. Please—you won't find what you expect. You'll fail. You'll be a loser, just like those Ohio cavalrymen.'

Of course, I said none of these things, but in a voice that must have sounded a bit strained I wished him luck and advised him to make the drive west in a pickup truck with a gun rack, three fully loaded rifles, and a stuffed elk tied casually over the top of his cab. It would all guarantee him instant acceptance as a part not only of the Old West, but also the New West.

Now I must tell you that, as soon as I had said that, I realized that I had said something that merited further exploration and thought. As the late fine historian of the American West Robert Athearn made clear in his last book, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, the New West of today in large measure and in many of its significant strains and details is strikingly not unlike the Old West—is so linked to it, in fact, that the continuity between the two is obvious. At the same time, as you and I know, the conventional wisdom is that the Old West, with its winners and losers, triumphs and failures, heroes and nasties, has long since disappeared. In a sense, however, it seems to me that the Old West is a master of the disappearing act—that, with all its pluses and minuses, it disappears with each new generation—that it still continues to disappear—and that, therefore, it must always still be here for someone. Someone, for instance, like my young friend in Rockford.

Almost a century ago, the artist Frederic Remington mourned the demise of *his* Old West. 'I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever,' he wrote in 1905. 'I saw the living, breathing end of three American centuries of smoke and dust and sweat, and I now see quite another thing where it all took place. . . . It does not appeal to me,' he added.² Today we associate Remington with the popular conception of the Old West—but, aside from what we may think of the disappearance of wild riders, vacant land, and smoke, dust, and sweat in 1905 in the West, think of all of his predecessors and successors who years earlier and later deplored the passing of *their* Old West.

2. *American Heritage History of the Great West* (New York: American Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), p. 407.

I will refrain from dwelling on the generations of Native Americans who, more consistently than others, could have employed to newcomers and younger people the western land's most haunting lament, 'You should have seen it the way I did.' But what of the non-Indians—the long cavalcade of those who came like heightening waves, each one in turn observing and mourning the passing of an Old West, a West of myth and reality, of conflict and role playing, of triumph and failure? Consider the early Euro-American explorers, fur traders, and mountain men, moving like the Native Americans, the freest of the free, close to the spirits of the magical, mystical land in which the forces and fellow-creatures of nature were one with the humans. Their West, lasting into the 1840s, died hard, demoralizingly hard, for not only did the pathfinders begin to bump into each other and the beavermen become functionally obsolete and require retraining for other careers, but into their wild haunts, following on their private trails, turning their Indian wives against them, and foisting upon them the restraints and shackles of proper Christian conduct, came missionary families.

'You should have seen this place before they showed up,' the grizzled old mountain man, Bill Craig, hectored by the newly arrived Reverend and Mrs. Henry M. Spalding, might well have complained up in the Nez Perce country of Idaho. 'The Old West is gone—gone forever.'

Thus, the fur trappers' Old West departed, but a decade later, so did that of the pioneer missionaries—their isolated, autocratic domains overrun and corrupted by the materialistic builders of still another New West. By the eve of the Civil War, the Reverend Spaldings and Lees and DeSmets and Points could tell of a vanished West that they had first known when all was fresh and young and innocent and there were no white whiskey sellers or venal government Indian agents in the neighborhood. The missionaries' Old West disappeared in a panorama of dime-novel history, obliterated by wagon trains of land-hungry emigrants who came west on the Oregon and California Trails, littering the countryside

with garbage and trash and bringing with them measles and whooping cough that decimated the Indians and caused the frightened tribal survivors to carve up their white religious teachers with hatchets and knives; by the expanding settlements and irrigated fields of polygamous Mormons in the arid lands by the Great Salt Lake; by profane troops who carved out wagon roads through God's wildernesses and marched to the Walla Walla and Mexico and Southern California with cigars, packs of playing cards, and female camp followers with names like *The Great Western*; and, above all, by the proliferating, Satanic mining centers with their unconscionable, uncontrollable hordes of sinners. It left little for a helpless missionary to do in this strange, revolting New West, but, like Oregon's Reverend Jason Lee, save himself and go into the real estate business.

Then came the telegraphers, the freighters, the stage drivers, the railroad builders, the farm and ranch families, the loggers, the teachers, the cowboys who replaced the buffalo hunters, the town builders, the gamblers, and the men with power and money who tried to take over everything and, to a large extent, succeeded. Each of them, along with others of numerous callings—men, women, and children, Anglos, Hispanos, Blacks, and Asians, not to mention the beaten-up, pushed-around Native Americans—the good, the bad, the role models, the villains, shysters, and exploiters, the winners and failures—the many elements, in short, of the West's exquisitely super-dramatic pluralistic society, participated to some degree in various stages of the West's continuing development. Each one, if they so wished, could have told what their own Old West had been like before it had changed for better or worse and disappeared. 'I can remember,' they could have said, 'when the grizzly bears were as thick as deer, when people lived in dugouts, and there were no fences from the British line to Mexico.'

In sum, by the time of Frederic Remington, many old Wests had come and gone—defined by each new generation in a personal mosaic of abstractions, myths, and realities. Nor was Remington by any means at the tail end of the parade. His unappealing New

West became eventually somebody else's romantic and dramatic Old West, as could have been attested by anyone making western films in Hollywood in the 1940s where there was no shortage of bandy-legged old codgers available as consultants and bit actors who by the hour, on and off the movie sets, spun yarns about their days in Tombstone or Old Idy-ho with Wyatt Earp, Charlie Siringo, Big Nose Kate, and other characters of *their* Old West—when the West, according to them, was the Real West.

I advance this proposition with some sense of security, for I am now old enough myself not only to have listened to some of those old codgers, but to believe genuinely that I, too, experienced my Old West—one that I wish you all could have seen, but that is no more. I can't tell you precisely when it struck me to exclaim, as did Frederick Jackson Turner back in the 1890s, 'There goes the neighborhood,' but, roughly, my Old West existed between the early 1930s and the 1950s—not that long ago that it wasn't shared by many who still count themselves young—but to those who remember with me, *what* changes we have seen. In the mid-1950s, I wrote a lengthy, color-illustrated story for *Time Magazine*, reporting that, with air conditioning for automobiles, homes, and workplaces, Americans were learning to live in the western deserts and were already beginning to spread across the frontier-like regions of Arizona and smog up such traditional havens for asthmatics as Tucson and Phoenix. I think that may have been the end date of my Old West.

Its start is easier to recall. In 1934, as a Depression-era undergraduate at Harvard, I tried to write a story for a western pulp magazine and make a little tuition money. I had never been in the West, and my story came bouncing back with a brief note from the editor: 'Maple trees do not grow in a waterless desert. Write on subjects you know something about.' I wrote another story, this one about professional wrestling with which I was familiar, and I sold it to MGM studios, who gave me a contract to come to California and write it as a movie. So in June 1934 I started from New York on a Greyhound bus for California. Carbon monoxide

fumes from the exhaust filled the bus, and by the time we reached the western shore of the Hudson River, I was carsick. But I stuck it out, and it was quite an adventure. We halted every two hours for what they called comfort stops, and every so often we had to change buses. We had so many flat tires and breakdowns, during which we could hop off the bus and walk around, that I really felt that I was getting to know grassroots America. In Kansas and Colorado, we went through one roaring dust storm after another, and in the sagebrush country along old Route 66 in New Mexico and Arizona our decrepit bus seemed almost as helpless and forlorn as the flivvers and jalopies of the desperate columns of Okie families who were lurching along with us toward California. We had so many repairs to cope with that we had plenty of time to meet and talk with Arkies and Okies, as well as with waitresses and other footloose folks who were drifting across the largely empty, Depression-ridden country from one job to another at the roadside filling stations, camps, and cafes, whose menus offered little beside chili and greasy chicken fried steaks. By the fourth morning, I was so groggy that I left my raincoat at one of the cafes in the Arizona desert. Forty miles farther on, I discovered my loss, but, the year being 1934, the driver turned around, and we went back for it. By the time we reached California, I and my fellow-passengers felt a close attachment to each other, as if we had been in a battle together, sharing common challenges and experiences in a strange frontier land.

But the smattering of the West that I had seen had got into my blood. Beginning within a few weeks and continuing on ever since, I have crisscrossed and grown familiar with every part of the American West, laden at first with preconceptions derived from reading or seeing movies about the earlier West. Much of it, of course—the images of a West that no longer existed, or never had existed—raised unfulfilled expectations, but much also helped provide substance to a West that was becoming my own.

Much of the Southwest, for example, was still an exceedingly perilous place through which to travel in threatening weather or

without extra gas, food, water, and maps. Life-threatening situations and problems of survival in rugged, waterless, and uninhabited terrain were not uncommon. One threaded through the almost roadless canyons and redrock country of the Four Corners and southern Utah with pre-planning and caution and crossed California's awesome Mohave Desert in summer only at night with a desert waterbag hanging over the car's radiator grill. Quite often, as history and legend predicted, one came on a lone, scruffy prospector with his pickaxe, pans, and burro in some wild fastness in the Mohave. Today, the Mohave is familiar and—except to fools—as snug and secure as any part of the country. It is laced with roads plied daily by ice cream, TV repair, and diaper service delivery trucks, is carpeted with towns, irrigated farms, air bases, and high-tech and government installations; Hollywood celebrities rush across it from Los Angeles to Las Vegas in air-conditioned black-windowed stretch limousines.

Las Vegas, itself—in the days before Bugsy Siegel and the mob discovered it—was a stifling desert town run by Mormons and noted for the hot-pillow trade of its army of prostitutes who dispensed their wares in seedy cribs in long, green, barracks-like buildings to a frontier clientele that included the hard-hat construction crews who were building the nearby Hoover—then known as Boulder—Dam. That Old-Western scene, of course, has been long vanished—replaced by the frenetic megalopolis that stretches from an underground nuclear-bomb testing site and a tactical fighter-plane air base past the garish casinos at Vegas and Laughlin to Bullhead City's high-megawatt, polluting power plant and the transplanted London Bridge at Rob McCulloch's real estate development of Havasu City. All are part of today's New West, but are as throbbingly exciting and significant as anything in the Old.

In the rest of Nevada in the 1930s, there seemed to be little but a vast, windy loneliness, sheltering among the cocoa-colored mountains and draws an occasional collapsed clump of a ghost town, the sands and rocks around the old buildings littered with

broken pieces of weathered wood and ancient bottles whose glass had turned purple or blue in the desert sunlight. At most sites, it isn't like that anymore. I revisited a few of the old mining centers recently and found that they had started a new life in the West of the 1990s. Beatty and Tonopah, large and thriving again, are full of motels and Japanese tourists. Rhyolite, out in the desert, abandoned and forgotten in the 1930s, was the object of media attention during my visit. A group of enterprising San Franciscans had come down to try to buy the old ghost town and rebuild it as America's first 100 percent all-gay city. They were vigorously opposed by almost every stalwart Nevadan, including the alarmed owners of several bordellos, as well as a swarm of their buckaroo customers, and I don't think the San Franciscans had their way. But thirty or forty years from now somebody will be telling this story about the Old West of 1990.

As for New Mexico back in the 1930s, many parts of it were far more Hispanic than now, still evoking sun-baked images of the country of a century earlier that lay at the end of the Santa Fe Trail. Fences of live ocotillo were everywhere in the small settlements, and near Albuquerque—then still a Fred Harvey railroad town, where Indian craftspeople met the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe's *Super Chief*—the roads were lined by grey-haired old Hispanos, muffled in serapes and sombreros, and plodding along with burros laden with charcoal brought down from the mountains. The nineteenth-century history of the Anglos and the Indians of New Mexico seemed at the time also to have been a very recent one. Along the Ruidoso in Lincoln County, there were people who claimed they had known Billy the Kid. And quarrels with the Pueblo Indians over land grants possessed by the Pueblos when New Mexico had still been a part of New Spain were common. New Mexico's former Senator and President Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert Fall of Teapot Dome notoriety, had just gone to prison, and Sen. Clinton Anderson, who later channeled federal funds into Albuquerque to fill it with government buildings, had not yet arrived on the scene.

In the Northwest, I could still stand along rivers and on mountain ridges, with no sign of man's handiwork in view, observing scenes that looked precisely as Lewis and Clark had described them in their journals in 1805 and 1806. From Montana and Wyoming to eastern Washington and Oregon, families on the plains and in the mountain valleys still lived close to their pioneer heritage in log houses with grass growing from their sod roofs. There were stage stations like the ones pictured by Charley Russell, still standing at places with names like Fishtrap and Zumwalt, and twenty-four-hour saloons and small hotels where the combination bartender-registration clerk kept the upstairs room keys on a rack behind the bar. At the long bars and green poker tables, where gambling was legal in Idaho and Montana, people drank boilermakers and stacked their change in silver dollars in front of them. Some of these old buildings were crumbling in places, but most were still intact, operating in the Big Hole, the Deer Lodge, the Mission, the Judith, the Bitterroot, the Beaverhead, the Stanley, and other holes and basins and valleys among the northern mountains. Today, most of those valleys are almost unrecognizable to me. New roads, housing tracts where once there were ranches, shopping malls, and 'strips' of used-car lots and fast-food drive-ins give them the look of an eastern suburb, except for their still-majestic mountainous backdrops.

As for California — well, it still had the characteristics of a colony of the monied east. It shipped out its agricultural bounties and natural resources and imported its manufactured consumer goods. It had no steel mill, automobile plant, or aerospace industry. In the south, where I lived, Wilshire Boulevard was lined by bean fields, and the clanging, old interurban red car scooted people around over the great distances now traversed by freeways. The principal non-agricultural industry associated with the state was that of Hollywood's make-believe world, and over a smogless Los Angeles, with picture-postcard scenery of snow-capped mountains rearing up behind orange and date groves, presided Sheriff Eugene Biscailluz, known today by aficionados of the Golden State as 'the

last great sheriff of the Old West.' As other reminders of the closeness still felt to that Old West of the 1930s were some of our Santa Monica neighbors, including Leo Carrillo, whose family went far back in the history of Spanish and Mexican California, and Will Rogers, the friend of the late Charley Russell. And, yes, Upton Sinclair, the muckraker, was still alive and well, running for governor of the state in 1934 on his own EPIC platform—end poverty in California. He lost, but it was a rousing, unforgettable campaign.

I possess many other memories, of course, of people, places, and events, now changed or vanished, that in 1991 constitute for me my Old West: a wild and almost inaccessible Hells Canyon of the Snake River, reached only by a mailboat with powerful engines—now the playground of jet boats, rubber rafts, and water surfers; old Chinese Polly who made a home for her white prospector husband far from civilization in the depths of the Salmon River canyon; Oglala and Hunkpapa Sioux Indians who were with Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull at the Little Bighorn and Nez Percés who were with Chief Joseph when he surrendered to General Miles and said he would fight no more forever; Ida Nash of Boise, whose Mormon grandfather pulled a handcart across the plains and mountains and died of malnutrition after reaching Salt Lake City because he had starved himself so that Ida's father, then a little boy, would have enough to eat and survive; the many high places in the West where one could still stand and look to the horizon in every direction and not see a sign of civilization. I remember this Old West of hoboes, bindlestiffs, gandy dancers, wobblers, and itinerant ranch hands, who walked the highways and rode the boxcars from one end of the country to the other. I remember their jungles and songs and poetry. And I remember many hardball conflicts over irrigation projects and public versus private dams and arrests for vagrancy and criminal syndicalism and union organizing in the Imperial Valley and the San Francisco general strike and Free Tom Mooney demonstrations, and the shelter belts and strip farms on the plains to cope with the Dust Bowl, and

the Taylor Grazing Act to bring back the grasslands in the West, and the Triple-A to bring back a prosperous agriculture. It was all a part of my Old West, but I know also that it all reflected only a single stage in a very long and unfinished story.

Today, the West is going through still another stage. Again, somebody's Old West is disappearing, and a new one is arriving—one to which people of today will look back thirty, forty, or more years from now and say, 'You should have known it in 1992.' Maybe they will add, 'When cows were still allowed to graze on public land,' or 'Before we ran out of water,' or 'When we all got taken by the S & Ls.'

Who knows? What is certain is that the West today is facing just as many problems and conflicts, just as much drama, just as many triumphs and failures, just as much exploitation and raping and accommodation and coping as ever. Many of the developments that are bringing on a New West derive from a continued perception that there is still a lot of empty space 'out there,' where undesirable things like polluting power plants, nuclear test sites, missile-launching silos, and toxic waste dumps can be put, and where the population is still so scarce and scattered that it lacks the political clout to complain. Parts of the West, therefore, like Idaho's Snake River plains, the Hanford area of eastern Washington, and regions of Montana, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming have become arenas of life-and-death conflict and fears over cancer-producing leakage and pollution.

At the same time, endemic crises—no longer of the familiar boom-and-bust nature, but seemingly deeper and more difficult to end—have struck the traditional economic foundations of large parts of the rural West, threatening the future of investment, employment, taxation, and income in the worlds of western agriculture, forestry, and the extractive industries. Once again, the single major employers in small towns have been shutting down, ranches and farms have been going belly-up, stores have been closing, people have been moving on, and main streets have been taking on the appearance of those in ghost towns. The enemies

today are more elusive than the eastern capitalists, banks, railroads, and insurance companies that gave rise to the populists of yesterday. This time they are global competition, world currency fluctuations, and environmental and ecological concerns. The resulting frustrations tear the people apart in intrigue and fights over matters that range from the spotted owl to who's responsible for the devastating forest fires, should we go for tourism and spoil the wonderful quality of life we now enjoy, and how do we keep our young people, or our teachers, or a doctor from leaving the county. In some parts of the West, indeed, people who once fought principally over land and water rights—which, incidentally, is still a lively phenomenon of the western scene—are oiling their guns to defend their right to use wood-burning stoves which health-conscious authorities, newly-concerned about the pollution of wood smoke, would now ban. Imagine the Old West without wood stoves and campfires! Although one shudders at the notion, perhaps their absence will be hallmark of a New West yet to come.

It would be wrong of me to plant the impression that all is misery and doom. Far from it. The key word is change. In the urban areas of the Northwest, for example, a radiant boom paced by new high-tech companies and by those who are selling their manufactured and processed products successfully to Pacific Rim or global markets has replaced a dismal bust of only a few years ago. And even in the rural areas, innovative entrepreneurs are diversifying the sources of local employment. My own little cowboy town of Joseph, Oregon, population a bare 1,000, with an economy based for a hundred years on cattle and lumber, and where I have lived part-time for thirty years, has gone from an Old to a less-macho New West by drawing to itself in the last few years a thriving colony of artists who sell their paintings and sculptures to national and international clients. What started it? A few people who opened an excellent foundry for the casting of bronzes. Today, Joseph is home to two or three foundries, co-existing with the ranches and logging outfits and beginning to overtake them as a source of employment and taxes in the county. For some of our

young men, in fact, it's a weird New West; they can as easily brand a calf, fell a Ponderosa pine, or work on a bigger than life-sized statue of John Wayne commissioned for an airport in Southern California.

At the same time, as change occurs, many strains of the older Wests remain, continuing on as they always have through all of the stages that have marked the West's history. I refer particularly to some of the unique characteristics, values, and qualities that have been associated with the realities and myths of both of what various historians are calling today the triumphal and the failed West. First, perhaps, is the continued spaciousness of the land—that awesome space—that must, and does, affect in one way or another all who live with it, whether in harmony or in struggle. The finest and most influential literature being produced today by western poets, authors, and essayists rests heavily on themes bearing on the relationship between men and women and the western landscape. They are far ahead of historians in recognizing the impacts and effects of this relationship. At the same time, it continues to encourage and sustain those old earmarks of the West—the cut-and-run, the rapist of natural resources, and there's-always-more-where-that-came-from philosophies of families who look on the public, untenanted properties as theirs to own and use and from which to make their living.

Secondly, western life is still basically an outdoor life. I have heard it said that the West has become urbanized, meaning in part that the expanding urban centers are powerful influences on the remaining rural sections. I think it is the other way around, and that the influences of the outdoors and the rural sections that surround each city have powerful impacts on the city dwellers, whether they be in Seattle, Spokane, Missoula, Casper, Denver, Salt Lake City, Dallas, Tucson, or wherever. The West is a region of outdoors people, of campers, fishermen, backpackers, bikers, migrant families chasing rainbows in pickup trucks, and others who may live in cities, but are blessed with fast and easy access to the woods, rivers, mountains, and deserts of the public lands. This

outdoor orientation, in turn, I believe, continues to feed and foster characteristics that are not limited to westerners but are more usually applied to them—namely, expansive, resourceful, self-reliant, and individualistic attitudes and postures that even in cities are reflected by fighting-mad support for the right to bear arms and the presence of swaggering urban cowboys and cowgirls and strutting car salesmen and S and L bankers in Stetsons and two thousand-dollar, crocodile-hide boots.

Third, life in much of the present-day West, especially its rural areas, is still not easy. A large part of the drama of western living always came from the struggles of humans against hostile or threatening forces of nature, and those struggles are still almost everyday occurrences. At times, staying alive and comfortable in the roaring blizzards, whiteouts, and sub-zero temperatures of a western winter and in the searing heat, tornadoes, droughts, hail and violent electrical storms of summer requires all that a person can give in the way of courage and stamina. In the small towns and on the lonely farms and ranches, the routines of western life, although aided by modern appliances and technology, go on. In the summer, parents hastily evacuate all their possessions, along with the children, dogs, and livestock, from their homes and pastures and help frantic loggers fight forest and grass fires that threaten their haybales and buildings. In the twenty-five-below nights of winter, they lie awake, listening for the drip of water, the tell-tale sound of frozen pipes, and, far from any plumber, go under the house themselves, shivering in the dark in down coats, with a flashlight and a hair dryer. Early in the morning, they are up again, she to drive a flatbed truck across the bumpy, snow-covered fields to the cattle, he to maintain his balance as he stands on the lurching flatbed behind her, pitching out the flakes of hay to the animals. Or, with a sick child that morning, they will drive seventy-five miles over mountain passes and grades of black ice to the nearest doctor or clinic.

This, to be sure, is only the smallest of small glimpses of the West of 1991—the New West of Indian assertiveness, of growing

Hispanic and Asian populations, of ski resorts and golf courses where pioneers once died of thirst, and of other manifestations of contemporary life that are settling in to replace the Old West that I claim was mine. Other commentators will tell you of the water barons, of the fights to save the old-growth forests and the sockeye salmon, of the international energy conglomerates and their strip mines and bullying of landowners on the plains, of violence and cheating and racism, and of the power and corruption of the modern-day, real-life J. R. Ewings and colonialists of the West.

Knowing that it's all there—the good and the bad, the family that makes it the honest way and the one you would like to boot out of the country—I prefer to stick, instead, with Henry David Thoreau who knew why every generation had—and will continue to have—its own Old West. 'We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race,' he said. 'We go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. . . . Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.'³

3. Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking,' in *Walden and Other Writings* (New York, 1950).

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