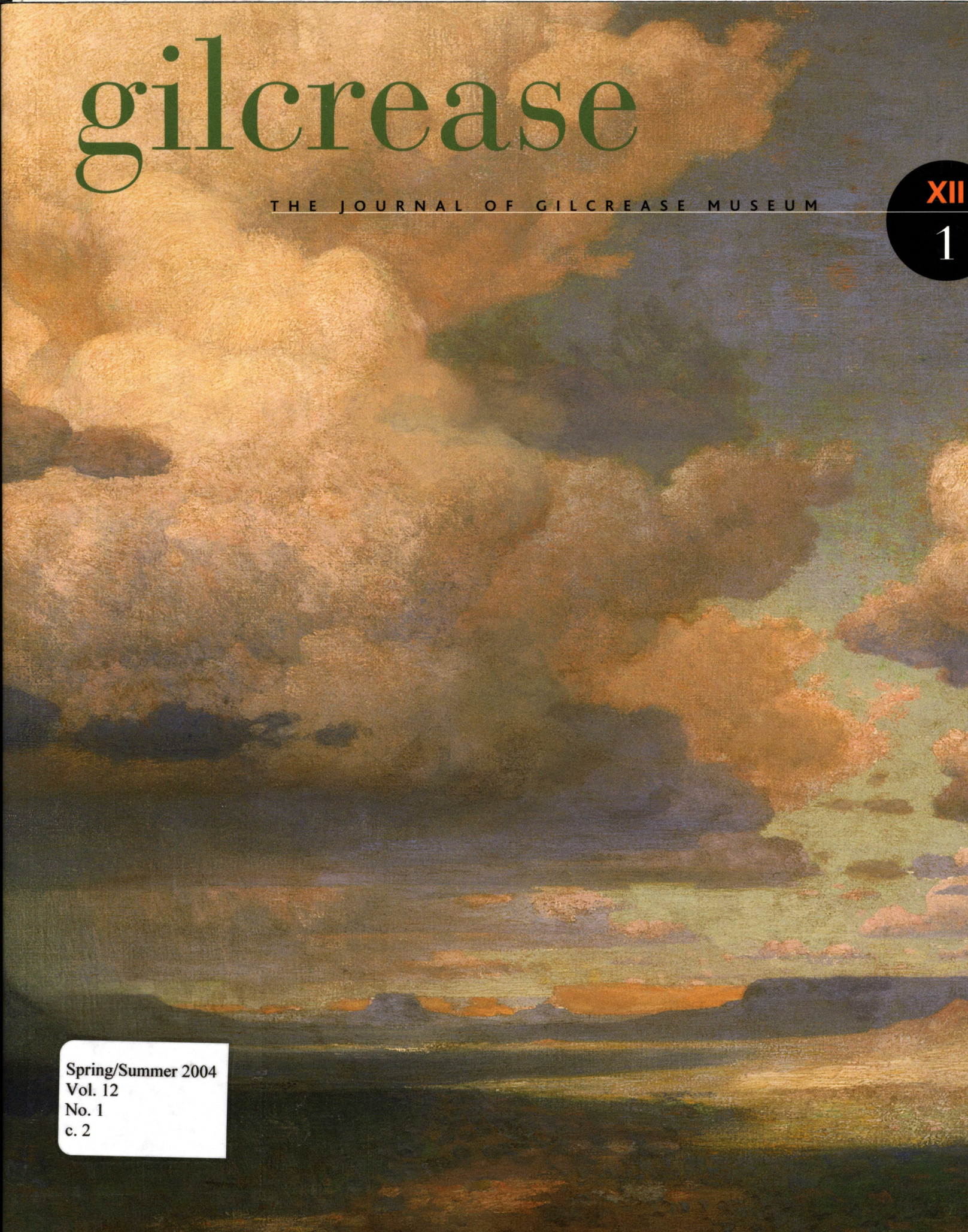


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The {Literary} Bloom in the West

BY MARY CLEARMAN BLEW

THE WARM SPRING CREEK SCHOOL, which I attended between 1947 and 1950, sat on a knoll among wheat fields in Fergus County, Montana. To the west we could see the line of sandstone bluffs and the dark stain of jackpine along the Judith River, to the north and east the blue of low mountains. In the winter the snow stretched in all directions, as far as we could see, and the air was pure and empty. The school had been built sometime before 1925, when my father attended it as an eighth grader, and it had been electrified sometime around 1940, when my aunt began a two-year teaching stint there, but by 1947 it still had not been insulated; it depended upon an oil heater through thirty-below-zero Montana winters. A telephone would be installed in 1948. Once a day a pair of students were sent across the gravel highway, over a stile into the neighbor's cattle pasture, and down to a spring to dip a bucket of water and carry it back to be poured into the Red Wing cooler and dispensed into cone-shaped paper cups. It was a coveted assignment, to be taken in turns.

Mary Clearman Blew was born and raised in Montana, on a small cattle ranch originally homesteaded by her great-grandfather in 1882. She has written and edited a dozen books, including the award-winning memoir *All But the Waltz: Five Generations of a Montana Family*. Her most recent book, *Writing Her Own Life*, will appear this spring.

She is also the acclaimed author of *Balsamroot*, and two collections of short stories, *Lambing Out* and *Runaway*. She co-edited *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* and *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. Blew teaches at the University of Idaho.

FACING: FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON, *Coming Home*, oil on canvas, 1929, Gilcrease 0127.1091.



I WAS COUNTRY WHEN COUNTRY WASN'T COOL, SINGS BARBARA
MANDRELL, AND HOW WELL I UNDERSTAND THOSE LYRICS.

A barbed wire fence surrounded the schoolyard with its set of clanging, frozen swings, a ramshackle barn for the horses that a few students still rode to school, and two regulation outhouses, one for the boys and one for the girls. Inside the single schoolroom, besides the fitful oil furnace, were a teacher's desk flanked by a flag and reproduction portraits of Washington and Lincoln, several rows of oak-and-iron joined desks, and a three-shelf bookcase containing, among its collection of hardback western genre novels, several works by Zane Grey. I was eight years old and avid for books, and I didn't stop until I had read every novel that bookcase held, and then I began rereading.

In retrospect, I believe I was reading in part for escape from what I perceived as the boring, everyday world of central Montana, where nothing interesting ever happened and nothing, as far as I could see, was likely to change. In my child's view, my father would always put up his hay with antiquated machinery and teams of crossbred draft horses; he would always calve out his hundred head of Hereford cows on the slopes of the South Moccasin mountains, riding from dawn till dark from late February until well into April. He would always struggle up our winding, narrow hill road with chains on all four wheels of the pickup to get my little sister and me to school, and I would always long for that greater, more exciting outside world that I found promise of in the books I read.

In fact, of course, we were on the cusp of change. The end of World War II brought more than electricity and party-line telephones to the rural families of central Montana. Paved roads and better transportation would lead to the closing of one-room schools like ours and the consolidation of others. Our sense of community would disappear with the schools, with television and electronic communication gradually erasing the old boundaries and sense of containment that we had taken for granted. With these changes would come a nostalgia I could never have imagined as I dipped my steel pen into real ink and judged whether the child just taking her seat would jar the whole row of desks and ruin the lines and scrolls of penmanship that I was practicing. I could never have supposed that the ordinary implements we used, like boots and branding irons, would become expensive western paraphernalia, or that oak-and-iron joined desks like the one I sat in would turn up in antique stores, or that my own children would view my upbringing as remote and romantic.

I was country when country wasn't cool, sings Barbara Mandrell, and how well I understand those lyrics.

WHEN I LOOK BACK, HOWEVER, at the books I was reading during the years I attended the Warm Spring Creek school and more importantly, the way I was reading them I can see that I was absorbing more than the glamour of the West, which I supposed was located in the past, probably in Texas or Arizona, and certainly not in dull Fergus County,

Montana. I loved Zane Grey's cowboys and gunslingers without perceiving their roles as male protectors and providers for helpless white womanhood; on the contrary, I was reading wonderful stories about endless landscapes in which all actions seemed possible. Grey's heroines may have flashed their orbs and heaved their bosoms, but they also rode and roped and ran ranches. For my seventh birthday I was given Grey's early novel *Betty Zane*, in which the heroic girl runs through rifle fire to bring back a keg of powder and not only save the besieged fort but fuel my daydreams. How could I not worship Betty Zane's beauty, her bravery, her fleetness of foot? She even outran her fiancé, and did he care? No, he worshipped her.

I was finding what I needed in western genre novels, and I did the same with other books I got my hands on. There was *Sand*, by Will James, in which a tenderfoot falls in love with a tough ranch girl whose skills far outreach his—"I'm sorry if you are hurt," [Rita] says, "But it was the only way to keep that cow from ramming into you. I had to crowd my horse between you and her, and there wasn't much room . . ." In Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka* and its sequels, there was Nell, whose strength and grace mirrored the ranch

CHARLES PERCY AUSTIN,
Night Hitch, oil on canvas.
Gilcrease 0137.1247.





women I knew—"Nell was careful to hold the reins fairly short so that, in case the mare took a sudden notion to buck, she could not get her head down. They made the rounds of the corral several times, then Rob opened the gate . . ."² And there was Ellen Webb, in Mildred Walker's *Winter Wheat*, who lived on a wheat ranch in northern Montana and knew how to get a truck unstuck from a mud hole on a country road.³ It never would have occurred to me that female characters, for instance, were left "only the passive role of civilizers and guardians of morality."⁴ I was discovering, in other words, a much more complicated West than was popularly supposed to exist in regional literature, and in retrospect I believe these books served me well.

But then I went off to high school in town, where it wasn't at all cool to be country, and from there to the University of Montana, where I learned that regional literature was quaint and perhaps a little embarrassing. My English professors made fun of Zane Grey, but the creative writing faculty did admire Walter Van Tilburg Clark, who had taught for a time at the University of Montana and whose novel *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940) was described as an attempt to elevate the form of genre western fiction to bona fide literature. Creative writing students were assigned Clark's short stories, whose themes now seem very contemporary, particularly "The Indian Well," which celebrates the wholeness of life and landscape and exposes the fragility of human intentions, and "The Portable Phonograph," which begins with a haunting image of wild geese migrating over the heads of the last few survivors of a nuclear holocaust and ends with one of the survivors ready to murder another over a wind-up phonograph and a few recorded symphonies, which they have been playing with thorns for needles.

Some hoped, during the late 1950s, that novels like A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, with its depiction of mountain men and the fur trade, might rescue regional literature from the cowboy. Was it possible that Guthrie might do for the West what Faulkner had done for southern regional literature? Leslie Fiedler, then a professor of English at the University of Montana, pointed out the unlikelihood of such a hope, in words that now seem prescient: ". . . so long as the Montanan fails to come to terms with the Indian, despised and outcast in his open-air ghettos, just so long will he be incapable of coming to terms with his own real past, of making the adjustment between myth and reality upon which a successful culture depends."⁵

A college lecture on regional literature during the late 1950s, when I was an undergraduate, would have begun with a discussion of the diaries and letters of early explorers of the American West, in particular *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, followed by brief attention to military records and perhaps to some of the diaries, letters, and reminiscences of pioneers on the Oregon and Santa Fe trails. This lecture might have paused for some time on examples of local color, such as Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." It might have considered a novel by Theodore Dreiser or Frank Norris—*McTeague*, perhaps—as an example of naturalistic determinism, and it certainly would have touched on *The Ox-Bow*

FACING: FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON,
The Night Wrangler, watercolor on
paper. Gilcrease 0227.1329.

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Incident as a culmination of as well as an attempt to transcend the genre western novel. It might have concluded with reference to a couple of Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novels set in the West, H.L. Davis's *Honey in the Horn* (1935) and A.B. Guthrie's *The Way West* (1949).

Several assumptions would have been implicit in this lecture—that western regional literature reflects the westward movement of white settlement, that its story is told by white men, and that the story has to do with a set of oppositions: the East versus the West; the wilderness versus civilization; male courage, determination, and aggression versus passive feminine values of religion, culture, and morality. The lecture also would have assumed that regional literature is fringe literature, outside the mainstream, but defined and judged by eastern publishing houses and their discerning readership. For the aspiring young writer, regional literature represented a dead end, imitative and exhausted. That young writer would do better to find newer and more vibrant models, and while I cannot of course speak for all programs at that time, the fiction we were assigned or encouraged to read in contemporary literature or creative writing courses at the University of Montana in the late 1950s included the standard works of Hemingway and Faulkner along with novels by Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and James Gould Cozzens, and short stories by Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth.

FACING: CHARLES M. RUSSELL, *Bell Mare*, oil on canvas, 1910. Gilcrease 0137.2242.

BELOW: BILL ANTON, *Faithful*, oil on linen, 2003. Gilcrease 0137.2522.





CHARLES M. RUSSELL, *Meat Makes Fighters*, watercolor on paperboard, 1918. Gilcrease 0237.1324.

From the University of Montana I went on to graduate school at the University of Missouri, where I wrote a dissertation on the Latin influences on Ben Jonson's early plays and thought very little about regional literature. When I came back to Montana to teach in 1969, I was out of touch with writing and writers of the West, but I also lived hundreds of miles from a library that would have supported the academic research I had been doing, and so I began writing fiction again, drawing for material upon the ranch life of my childhood. My return to fiction was happenstance, or so I thought at the time, but it put me in touch with the handful of writers in Montana who at that time were beginning to reinvent regional literature: in particular, James Welch, William Kittredge, Annick Smith, and Ivan Doig.

Welch, a mixed-blood Blackfeet and Gros Ventre raised on reservations in northern Montana, published his first novel, *Winter in the Blood*, in 1974. I cannot overstate the excitement I felt when I first read it and marveled over the perfect paragraph with which the novel begins. Although it is so familiar, I quote the entire paragraph here to illustrate the absolute authority behind these deceptively simple sentences:

In the tall weeds of the borrow pit, I took a leak and watched the sorrel mare, her colt beside her, walk through burnt grass to the shady side of the log-and-mud cabin. It was called the Earthboy place, although no one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years. The roof had fallen in and the mud between the logs had fallen out in chunks, leaving a bare gray skeleton, home only to mice and insects. Tumbleweeds, stark as bone, rocked in a hot wind against the west wall. On the hill behind the cabin, a rectangle of barbed wire held the graves of all the Earthboys, except for a daughter who had married a man from Lodgepole. She could be anywhere, but the Earthboys were gone.⁶

Nowhere in these sentences is a trace of what William Bevis calls cultural colonialism;⁷ here we have a voice that is stark, grave, sure of its power to control the rhythms of sentences and the interweaving of imagery. "The narrator is not an adventurer or visitor in the exciting West; he is taking a leak. The scene is not new, but old. The horses, Indians, log cabin, and tumbleweeds are not exotic subjects, they are simply the context of someone's life," writes Bevis. "We know his life will be taken seriously. We know it will be from his point of view. This is how art is made."⁸

I felt the same way when I read the opening sentence of Ivan Doig's nonfiction *This House of Sky* (1978): "Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And then stopped."⁹ Doig follows this single-sentence paragraph with a lyrical description of the Bridger Range of southwestern Montana, where, during the summer of 1945, his parents had been herding sheep on forest reserve land up until his mother's death. The language belongs to Doig as surely as the landscape; he speaks from his center. But what particularly struck me about *This House of Sky* was the way it focused upon the lives of an ordinary ranch family that could have been my own. *This House of Sky* is, in large part, about work. It is not glamorous, but gritty.

Welch and Doig were men of my own generation, and I was in awe. How had they achieved this level of artistry? Certainly their natural talent was a part of the answer, and also the writers with whom they had studied. Welch in particular had benefited from working closely with the poet Richard Hugo, who told him to write about what he knew. But a further answer to the question of how the son of an itinerant sheepherder and the kid from the

“WHEREAS WRITING OF THE OLD WEST PROCEEDED FROM
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PROCEEDS FROM ASSUMPTIONS . . . (OF) COMMUNITY.

reservation came to establish themselves as writers in the first wave of what would come to be known as the New West is two-fold: first, the groundwork for a vibrant regional literature had been quietly laid for years, and second, its audience had finally learned how to read.

What is the New West? Susan Rosowski describes its central tenet as “The notion of shared life in place as the necessary alternative to the territorial antagonisms of the past,”¹⁰ and adds, “Whereas writing of the Old West proceeded from assumptions of opposition . . . writing of the New West proceeds from assumptions of both: inside and outside, the individual in community. Once the modernist’s lament that the center cannot hold has given way to an acknowledgement of multiple centers, the aim is no longer to resolve difference but instead to find points of convergence.”¹¹

Krista Comer says that the New West is “born out of, and responds to, the emerging culture of postmodernism. . . . This complex alliance between realism, regionalism, and antimodernism articulates not only the dominant western aesthetic but also a strategic rebuttal of, and counterattack upon, the dominant national aesthetic, which regards regionalism as a second-rate literary and critical undertaking.”¹²

In other words, postmodernism—a way of describing the culture that developed in the aftermath of World War II, with the use of atomic weapons and the rapid growth of technology, which emphasizes the indeterminacy of meaning and the decenteredness of existence—has provided us with a way to look at the multifaceted nature of the West and to hear the myriad voices that attempt to describe it. Scholars of Western American literature and history are learning to expand their definition of literature to include a wide variety of texts, including letters and diaries. They ask how a wider definition of literature affects their view of the West and its past, and they ask how the texts are affected by their political or economic contexts. They recognize that the West is and has always been populated by many cultures

and ethnicities—Native Americans, Mexicans, Asians, African Americans—and that each has many stories to tell. They are learning how to look between the lines of these stories, to search for what is being withheld, to listen to silences, and they are dusting out corners and shedding new light on, for example, work once dismissed as “sentimental” or “romantic” by white women who described nineteenth century settlement, including Jessie Benton Fremont, Helen Hunt Jackson, Mary Hallock Foote, Isabella Bird, and Mary Austin, and by native women like Sarah Winnemucca, a Northern Paiute, whose *Life Among the Piutes* was published in 1883.

The very landscape of the West is being reimagined. What do we mean by “West,” and what are its boundaries? Does it have boundaries? Does it include Texas, and if not, why not? (Participants in a website devoted to western literature recently debated on-line whether or not Houston could be considered part of the West, and decided that probably it could not.) And what about California? What about the cityscape? Krista Comer argues that while western literary men have not written much about urban landscape, preferring the more traditional affirmation of wilderness and solitude, the landscapes of Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Francisco offer unexpected possibilities to writers like Joan Didion, Wanda Coleman, and Maxine Hong Kingston.¹³

Postmodernism can be an easy and inexact label, and certainly several factors have been at work in the reinvention of the west. The mountain-shifting movements of the

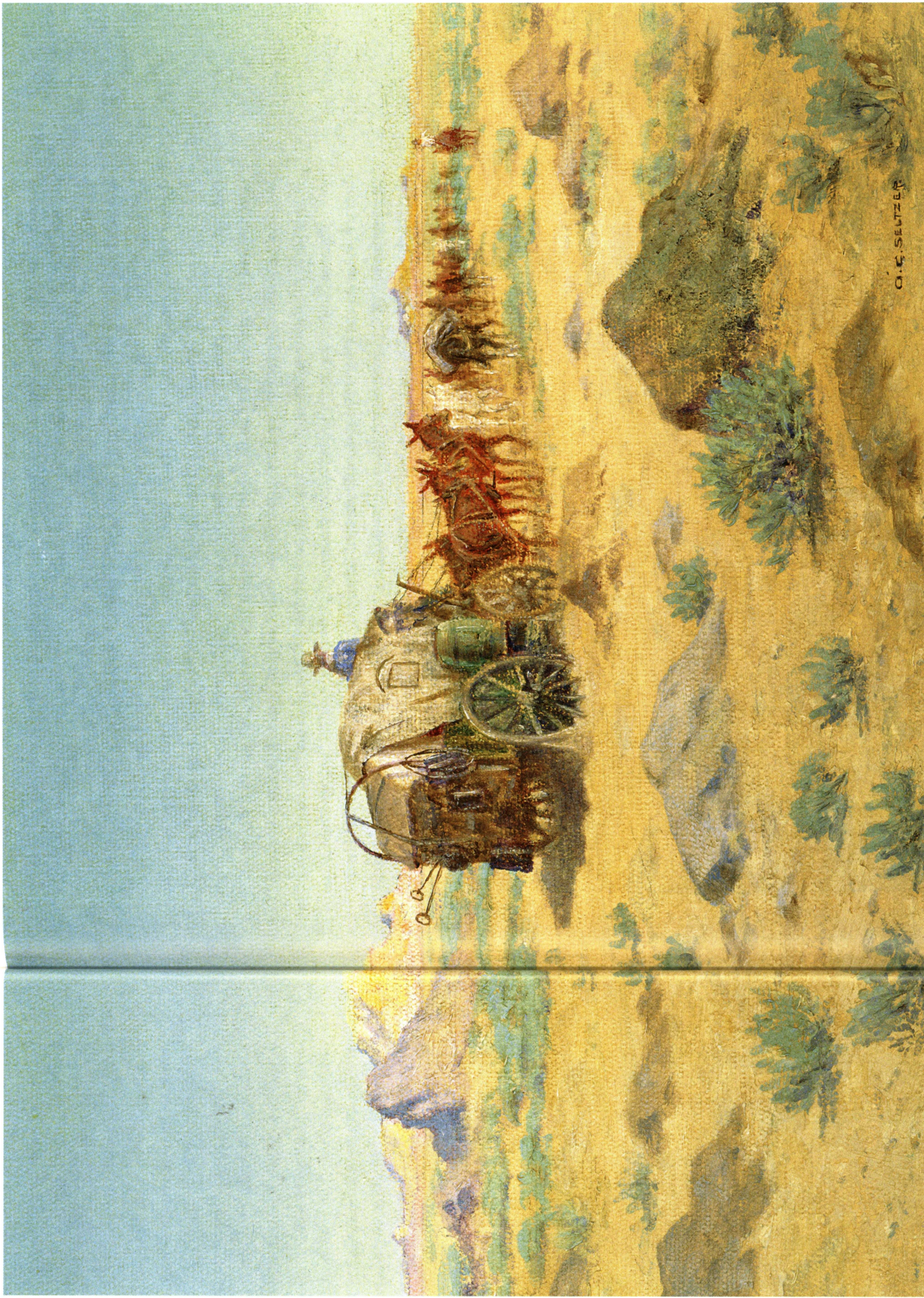
ILA MCAFFEE, *Longhorns*
Watering on a Cattle Drive,
oil on masonite. Gilcrease
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1960s—the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the activities of AIM and other Native American movements—awakened Americans to inequalities of race and gender and class and helped us to hear the multiplicity of stories that have so enriched the literature of the west. The importance of “green” awareness, which has drawn our attention to the ways that population shifts, irrigation, mining, logging, and cattle grazing have stressed the fragile ecology of the West, has played its part in the flowering of nature writing and affected the work of writers from Edward Abbey to William Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, Douglas Peacock, and John Keble. And the work of a new generation of historians has provided a framework for understanding the legacy of conquest, to borrow Patricia Nelson Limerick’s phrase.¹⁴

Does this mean that nineteenth-century western writers and writers during the first sixty years of the twentieth century were unaware of economic, ecological, racial, and gender issues, or indifferent to their consequences? Nothing could be farther from the truth; in fact, the foundations for the work of James Welch and Ivan Doig and others of their generation—which in turn has helped to release a veritable flood of poets, novelists, memoirists, nature and science writers—were laid by their predecessors. I want to touch on two of these predecessors, Walter Van Tilburg Clark and Frank Waters, about whom too little has been written, and upon Wallace Stegner, “the grandfather of western literature,” about whom a great deal has been written.

Clark may be best remembered for *The Ox-Bow Incident*, but I would urge anyone who is interested in tracing back the themes of time and change and memory, the relationship between art and life, and the role of the artist in the West, to read not only the short stories I have already mentioned but also “The Wind and the Snow of Winter,” which won first place in the O. Henry Awards in 1945 and which Stegner himself has called “an absolute first-rate achievement,”¹⁵ and particularly the novel *The City of Trembling Leaves*, which also appeared in 1945. Set in Reno, Nevada, in the early decades of the twentieth century, *The City of Trembling Leaves* is the story of young Tim Hazard’s struggle to become a musician. Countless novelists since James Joyce have depicted the home town as a deadening pit of conformity from which the young artist must flee, but Clark develops Tim and his music as growing out of, as well as away from, Reno. The artist, not as the solitary and estranged figure, but as inextricably part of and depending upon his community, is emblematic of the New West as we have come to understand it.



OLAF C. SELTZER, *The Chuck Wagon*,
oil on canvas, ca. 1931-1932.
Gilcrease 0137.873.

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The Woman at Otowi Crossing (first published in 1966, revised and republished in 1987) is probably Frank Waters' best-known work. Set just before and during World War II at Los Alamos, New Mexico, the novel juxtaposes scientific discovery—the secret development of the atomic bomb—with archaeological research and with mysticism as a way of knowing. I can admire it, but my favorite Waters novel is *Pike's Peak: A Family Saga*, published in 1971 but shaped out of novels Waters wrote during the 1930s. A massive novel that traces the decline of a nineteenth-century Colorado family caught in the consequences of gold fever, *Pike's Peak* shows the psychological and economic effect of western get-rich-quick schemes and the siren call of gold upon family and community. In both novels, Waters shows sensitivity to the confluence of Indian, Mexican, Spanish, and Anglo cultures in the southwest that shows that twenty-first century concepts of multiculturalism are not new, only broadened and enriched and more widely read and discussed.

Wallace Stegner has been criticized for elitism, preferring the study of recognized literary works to the close textual examination of documents ranging from diaries and letters to advertisements and editorials and oral histories; for his disdain for the idea of “women’s literature;” and, notably by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, for neglecting and misunderstanding Native American history.¹⁶ His description of the west as “the geography of hope” also has garnered him much criticism, although in later essays he refers to that description as made “in a reckless moment.”¹⁷ Despite this criticism—perhaps because, in spite of the criticism, he rises above it—no writer in the West has earned more prestige than Wallace Stegner. It’s hard to know where to start in discussing such an influential writer. His role as a teacher, his

WILLIAM S. PRETTYMAN,
Chuck Wagon Meal,
 photograph on paper.
 Gilcrease 4326.3539.



WE WHO LIVE IN THE WEST KNOW THAT WE HAVE PLENTY TO WORRY ABOUT: THE WEATHER, THE WATER, THE ECONOMY, THE DEPLETION OF RESOURCES, THE VANISHING SPECIES, THE DEPOPULATION OF THE PRAIRIES, THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF SLEEPY WESTERN TOWNS INTO ENCLOSED PLAYGROUNDS FOR THE RICH.

historical writing, his environmental writing, his critical essays, his prize-winning novels—he is truly a towering figure in western literature, and yet my personal favorite of all Stegner’s work remains *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (Toronto, 1955), his account of his boyhood spent in the Cypress Hills of southern Saskatchewan, only a few miles north of the Montana border town where I lived and taught for many years.

The blurb on the back of my Bison Books paperback edition points out that *Wolf Willow* is an unusual book “because it combines fiction and nonfiction, history and impressions, childhood remembrance and adult reflection.”¹⁸ *Wolf Willow*, however, would be a fine book if it were to appear in the year 2000, but unusual in the quality of its prose and insight, not in its breaking the boundaries of form and genre to tell a story at once so complex and so basic—a boy’s growing awareness of the place where he lives, a man’s looking back at that place with understanding and regret and respect—that fiction or nonfiction alone cannot contain it. In searching for a passage to quote in order to share my pleasure in Stegner’s prose and insight, I’ve made a hard choice. Here is Stegner, remembering his brief experience with the last cowboys in Saskatchewan, capturing the ordinary, boring, daylight reality of their lives along with what I’ll call their earned glamour:

That new frontier, of which my family was a part, very soon squeezed out the Lazy-S. The hay lands in the bottoms were broken up into town lots, my father was growing potatoes where whitefaces had used to graze, the punchers were drifting off to Alberta. But while we had them around, we made the most of them, imitating their talk and their walk and their songs and their rough-handed jokes; admiring them for the way they tormented Mah Li; hanging around in the shade of the bunkhouse listening to Rusty, who was supposed to be the second son of an earl, play the mouth organ; watching the halfbreed Assiniboin braid leather or horsehair into halter ropes and hackamores. I heard some stories about the winter of 1906-07, but I never heard enough. Long afterward, digging in the middens where historians customarily dig, I found and read some more, some of them the reminiscences of men I knew. What they record is an ordeal by weather. The manner of recording is laconic, deceptively matter of fact. It does not give much idea of how it feels to ride sixty or eighty miles on a freezing and exhausted pony¹⁹

To find out how it feels, Stegner turns to fiction, which waits for anyone who has not yet had the privilege of reading *Wolf Willow*.

We who live in the West know that we have plenty to worry about: the weather, the water, the economy, the depletion of resources, the vanishing species, the depopulation of the prairies, the transmoification of sleepy Western towns into enclosed playgrounds for the rich. What we also have, in these early years of the twenty-first century, is a blossoming of

regional literature beyond anything I could have imagined as an undergraduate at the University of Montana, a veritable paradise for readers that I could only have yearned for as an eight-year-old at the Warm Spring Creek school. The writers of these books draw our attention to the great issues of our time, and sometimes they offer solutions to our follies, but most importantly, they ask us to pay attention, to listen, and to treat each other well. Some of the strongest voices of our time are working class voices, women's voices, ethnic voices, all saying, in effect, "Here we are. We've been here all along. Here are our many stories. Read!"

I'll indulge myself by quoting from two recent favorites. First, here's Debra Magpie Earling, beginning her 2002 novel, *Perma Red*. Read and listen to the magic, the music, the absolute assurance of these opening lines that take us to a place we have never been:

When Louise White Elk was nine, Baptiste Yellow Knife blew a fine powder in her face and told her she would disappear. She sneezed until her nose bled, and Baptiste gave her his handkerchief. She had to lie down on the school floor and tilt back her head and even then it wouldn't stop. She felt he had opened the river to her heart. The cloth he had given her was wet with her blood. She felt hot and sleepy. Sister Thomas Bernard pulled her up and told her to go to the bathroom and wash her face. Sister pinched the bridge of Louise's nose. Louise kept the handkerchief pressed to her face, embarrassed by all the attention she was getting. She could feel her blood cool in slow streams between her fingers. She remembered at one point Baptiste Yellow Knife had knelt down beside her. Her head was empty. She imagined the veins in her temples quivering. Her skin draining color. Her face glowing, a candlelit egg. Suffering. A saint. Awkward Baptiste. Pigeon-toed and dusty Baptiste was kneeling beside her cradling her head with his cool, dry hands, his voice tickling her ears. He was leaning over her, whispering to her, whispering a story. His voice was in her ear. She felt Sister Bernard pull Baptiste away from her. The back of her head danced with silver stars and Louise fell back into dreaming, a snagged fish released again to water.²⁰

WILLIAM S. PRETTYMAN,
Arriving for a Meal
photograph on paper.
Gilcrease 4326.3545.



And now, as is fitting, I quote from near the conclusion to Melanie Rae Thon's *SweetHearts* (2000). Again, listen to the magic, the music, the comfort she brings:

What is grace?

A father and daughter and child live together in a house on a lake far away where it snows in August, where the voices of wild horses call from a distant island. Love here is a stone where waves are breaking. Love this hard is not a transgression. We learn to forgive ourselves and each other for our misguided passions. We do not speak in words. We explain nothing.

What is hope?

A child called Rosana cries in the night, and the mother who has adopted her is alive; Wanda Troy floats into Rosana's room, quiet as an angel. But this woman has flesh and substance, human hands and human arms to rock a child. She whispers the words that are not words, in a soft, sweet language, in a tongue of fire, in the mystery of sound between mother and daughter.²¹

So much to read. Books, books appearing everywhere, and—best of all possible paradises—no chance of running out of books to read! The titles I know best are coming from my own Rocky Mountain region, but a list of some of the best-known writers of the Southwest is enough to send anyone running to the nearest independent bookstore.

Following Edward Abbey and N. Scott Momaday, the Southwest has Simon Ortiz and Sam Shepard and Rudolfo Anaya and John Nichols and Cormac McCarthy and Leslie Silko, whose *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) seems to me one of the greatest, if greatly misunderstood, novels of our time. And so many more.

California, home of Joan Didion and Kevin Starr and Gina Berriault and Diane Wakoski and Robert Hass, is burgeoning with writers like Richard Rodriguez and Ronald Takaki and Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan and Gary Sota and Wanda Coleman. And so many more. The Great Plains, rejoicing in Frederick Manfred and Mari Sandoz and Willa Cather and O.E. Rolvaag, now offer novelists Douglas Unger and Kent Haruf and Ron Hansen and Dan O'Brien and nonfiction writers Patricia Hampl and Kathleen Norris and Linda Hasselstrom, along with great Western presses in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Norman, Oklahoma. Texas. Alaska. The Pacific Northwest. Hawaii. Where to start.

Start here—with this issue of the *Gilcrease Journal*.

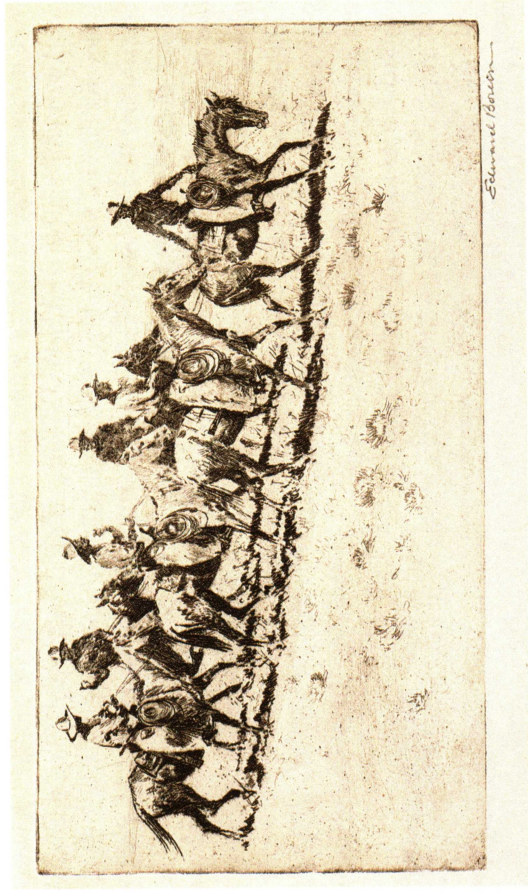
- 1 Will James, *Sand* (New York, 1929), p. 54.
2 Mary O'Hara, *My Friend Flicka* (New York, 1941), pp. 142-143.
3 Mildred Walker, *Winter Wheat* (New York, 1944), pp. 82-82.
4 Franz Blaha, "Zane Grey," *Updating the Literary West* (Fort Worth, 1999), p. 950.
5 Leslie Fiedler, "The Montana Face," originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1949, reprinted in *The Last Best Place*, ed. William Kittredge and Annick Smith (Helena, Montana, 1988), p. 752.
6 James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York, 1974), p. 1.
7 William W. Bevis, *Ten Tough Trips* (Seattle and London, 1990), p. xii.
8 *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.
9 Ivan Doig, *This House of Sky* (New York, 1978), p. 3.
10 Susan Rosowski, "New Wests," *Updating the Literary West* (Fort Worth, 1999), p. 120.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
12 Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West* (Chapel Hill and London, 1999), pp. 2-3.
13 *Ibid.*, pp. 62-67.
14 Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York 1987).
15 Wallace Stegner, "Walter Clark's Frontier," *Where the Bluebird Sings to the LemonadeSprings: Living and Writing in the West* (New York, 1992), p. 184.
16 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1996).
17 Wallace Stegner, "Striking the Rock," *Where the Bluebird Sings*, p.84.
18 Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: a History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1980) cover blurb.
19 *Ibid.*, pp. 137-8.
20 Debra Magpie Earling, *Perma Red* (New York, 20020, pp. 3-4).
21 Melanie Rae Thon, *SweetHearts* (New York, 2000), p. 229

THE WAGON INCIDENT

BY BUCK RAMSEY

He was so nearly drained now of strength for thought or effort or will that he could hardly remember any time in his life when he wasn't wrestling the dwarf hoodlum locked across his chest, and for the first moment since the match began he lay still. His young hide was rubbed raw by the brittle winter grass still matted underneath the late spring growth, and the sting of his sweat, seeping face to boot tops, had to it a tonic in its smell, in the earth blood it transfused to him. There surged through him the briefest memory of life whole, and in that same instant he saw against the light of the full moon the hangman's noose fastened over the hoisted tongue of the chuck wagon, and he gathered up everything left in him to try once more heaving the dwarf loose. The whooping of the cowboys, happy to see the fight was not done, reached his mind weak as the final canyon echo of a distant yell. But the sting's tonic quickly dissolved and the whooping inspired nothing, for he was done with the tussle. That last gasp and sigh of a heave, which hadn't budged the dwarf any more than a curse would budge a tick, left little Billy Deaver without the strength to summon up even a wish to fight for his life.

JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *Punchers*,
etching on paper. Gilcrease
2199.1974.



John Edward Borein (1872–1945) was one of the most popular artists of western scene painting. He was equally skilled at watercolor, ink drawing, and etching. Born and reared near Oakland, California, Borein began sketching at a very early age. In 1891 he spent a month at the San Francisco Art Association, where he met Maynard Dixon and Jimmy Swinnerton. Borein left art school for a life of cowboying, which he pursued for several years, constantly sketching and occasionally sending his drawings to magazines. He traveled the West, Mexico, and the Southwest.

During the early 1890s, Borein started etching. He produced a large number of etchings that were very popular and sold well. In 1901 he explored the Sierra Mountains and parts of Oregon and Idaho with Maynard Dixon, and during this trip he began working in watercolor. Upon his return to California he became an illustrator for the *San*

Francisco Call. He also continued painting in oil and to produce some sculpture. In 1907 he went to New York to work as an illustrator and to learn etching techniques. He enrolled in the Art Students League, studying with Childe Hassam.

Following years of difficult work, he established himself as a successful illustrator for the major magazines of the day, including *Century*, *Collier's*, *Harper's*, and *Sunset*, and became a highly regarded and much sought-after artist of life in the Old West. Borein's charismatic personality, combined with the traditional manners and dress of a westerner, made his New York studio a gathering place for displaced westerners. His close friends came to include Oscar Borg, Leo Carrillo, Charles Russell, Will Rogers, Olaf Seltzer, and President Theodore Roosevelt. However, Borein never felt completely at home in New York, and in 1921 he moved to Santa Barbara, California.

Borein painted few oils compared to the volume of his work in watercolor, probably due to lack of formal training in the medium. Charles Russell is said to have mentored him in New York, but Borein considered his oils so inferior to Russell's that he gravitated instead toward watercolors, drawings, and prints. His etchings were of such realistic quality and dynamism that no western artist has surpassed him in this area.

Borein based most of his work on events he had witnessed during his years as a working cowboy. He seldom used a model and did not take artistic license to enhance his images. Accurate documentation of each detail of cowboy life—the cattle, the horses, the gear—was of the greatest importance to him. In Borein's own words, "I will leave only an accurate history of the West, nothing else but that."

The noose was meant for him if he lost the wrestling match with the wagon cook's dwarf hoodlum. That was the verdict of the trial. A kid strayed from home to be a cowboy; he had, as evening came, ridden up to the wagon as the crew of cowboys gathered in for supper. They had welcomed, fed and friendlied him up—fered him, it now appeared, like sating a sacrifice before sending it to the gods. There was a trial, and a jury of cowboys found him guilty of breaking his mother's heart. The wagon boss, as trial judge, sentenced him and on that prairie bald of trees ordered the wagon tongue hoisted and fastened with the noose strung over it. But when the defense appealed the verdict, the judge relented somewhat and declared Billy Deaver wouldn't have to hang if he could outwrestle the dwarf. It would have been kinder to let the verdict stand with the blessed warm meal in his belly, for he retched that soured kindness on himself and the dwarf and their mat of grass. Billy's fight was barely less determined than desperate—even the judge and jury finally cheered the kid on—but the dwarf, sturdy as a tree stump and stubborn as an ant with a burden, wrestled him still in thirteen minutes.

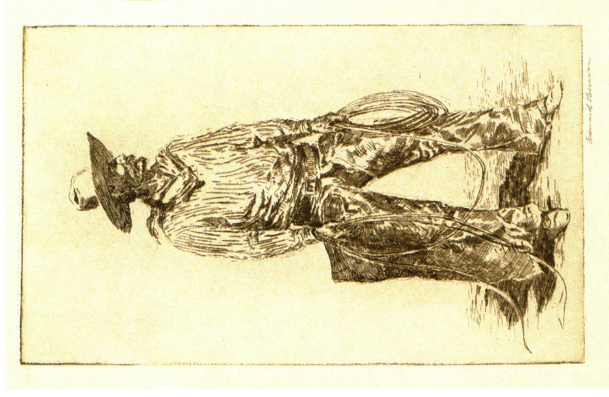
He had first seen the wagon from atop a mesa. He had been dropping into breaklands for about an hour, and the slanted sunlight on the land shapes gave it nuances visual and mystical and caused in him feelings he had never sensed about land. He saw cattle grazing so was sure he was on range tended by cowboys. Hoping for some sign of their whereabouts, he rode the long rim of the mesa. When he reached its promontory he saw the sight that would stay with him till his dying moment. There was the chuck wagon with its canvass fly spread from the wagon staves. At a distance cowboys horseback were stationed around a herd of hundreds of cattle, and the dust they roiled into the air cast a yellowing on the light of the lowering sun. He could not imagine a paradise with music better than the lowing of these cattle blending with the clatter of their horns. Here was all he had dreamed about and wished for. His gnawing hunger caused only a small part of the overwhelming urge to lower himself into the blessed vision.

By the time he rode up to the wagon, the cowboys were gathering in for evening chow. One cowboy stepped out of a group bunched together and sauntered toward him. The greeting jabbed in the air, which seemed to switch on a clean white light of a smile in his dirt and weather-browned face, and it lightened Billy's shy boy's dread of the strange encounter. He noticed the cowboys were bunched around a man whose clothes and manner marked him as a man apart, a man who seemed to be stopping off on his way from one meeting of consequence to another, bearing tidings from a settled part of the world.

"Say, young feller," the approaching cowboy said, "I'd judge you to be a long way from home since I know of none very close to here."

"Yessir, I come out this way lookin' for some work, lookin' for an outfit I could maybe throw in with."

The cowboy took the kid in fully with a glance and grinned down at his toe stirring dust from the grass. He might have been amused, maybe touched by memory at the boy's bravado and folly. "W-e-e-ll"—he stretched it out musically as if it were a chant word to contemplate by—"I don't quite know what to tell you about that, but I do know it's a long way to next chuck. The best thing for you to do, seems to me, is light for a while and have a go at our cookie's grub. Good or bad, it's the best you're gonna come across this day of your young life."



JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *A Puncher*,
etching on paper. Gilcrease 2199.1794.



JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *Racing for Home*,
etching on paper. Gilcrease 2199.1974.

After tending his horse, Billy was herded to the front of the chow line next to the man who had been the center of attention. The coat of his tan gabardine suit was wide at the shoulders and tapered to short tails split for the saddle, and his britches were tucked in the tops of expensive though dusty black boots nearly up to his knees. A black silk bandanna was channeled like a necktie under the collar of his white shirt and bore a fancy knot at the throat, and his silverbelly felt hat carried a crease that spoke well for the man. He gave off the impression of someone people would watch and heed and follow, a man born to be conspicuous without scripts or stagings. When you looked at him, you stared; when he looked at you, you looked away.

He caught Billy looking away. "Looks like we drifters found ourselves a friendly wagon for suppertime, didn't we, son?"

His manner gave Billy a boost. "Yessir," he said.

"Now, you're just a growing boy, I can see that," the man continued in a voice to fit the space around them, "so you go right ahead and eat your fill. The cookie will get insulted if you skimp on your helpings." He nudged Billy to the front, and that seemed the biggest honor Billy Deaver had known in his young life.

"Yessir, thank you, sir," he said.

Though Billy never spoke as they ate, all the banter over chuck seemed light and friendly with never a questioning word or threatening look thrown his way. After the meal, in fact, the cookie brought out a fiddle and asked Billy if he had a favorite tune. Billy told him it was "Abide with Me." There was some laughter.

"It's clear the boy is a stranger out here. He needs some heathen cowpunch music, Cookie," a cowboy from the crowd said, and the cookie fiddled and sang some songs Billy had never heard. The men seemed nice, even attentive to this young stray.

The cowboy who had first greeted Billy, who turned out to be the wagon boss, caught the eye of the man of style and bearing and motioned him aside with a tilting of the head. Soon other cowboys joined them. For Billy, their bursts of laughter added to the jolly cowboy atmosphere of the night settling nicely in. The crowd broke up and gathered back at the campfire, and the wagon boss walked to where Billy reclined on his saddle.

"Son," he said, very friendly, "you might as well throw in with us for the night. Plenty room here, plenty breakfast in the morning."

"Yessir, thank you, sir." Billy noticed the man had said nothing about hiring him on.

The flickering light from the fire revealed some of the cowboys glancing aside at Billy with laughter in their eyes growing out of some new shared idea of him. He squirmed and grew uneasy, and in a short time the wagon boss and the man in the suit came and loomed over him.

"Son, I'm afraid we need to know more about you." The words sent a chill through young Billy Deaver.

That is when the trial began. The wagon boss pronounced himself judge, appointed the man in the suit prosecutor, and told the cookie to get his fiddle and stand in as attorney for the defense. Because he didn't want a tie vote and time was short, the judge selected five cowboys to the jury. Each qualified under the prosecutor's questioning by allowing he didn't object to hanging even a lad of tender age if the punishment fit the crime, and each qualified for the defense by showing he could carry a tune. The man in the suit began the questioning.

"Okay, son, state your name, please."

"Billy Deaver."

"And how old are you, Billy?"

"Fourteen."

"And where is your home, Billy?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, let me put it this way: where do your parents live?"

"They have a place down by where the railroad ends."

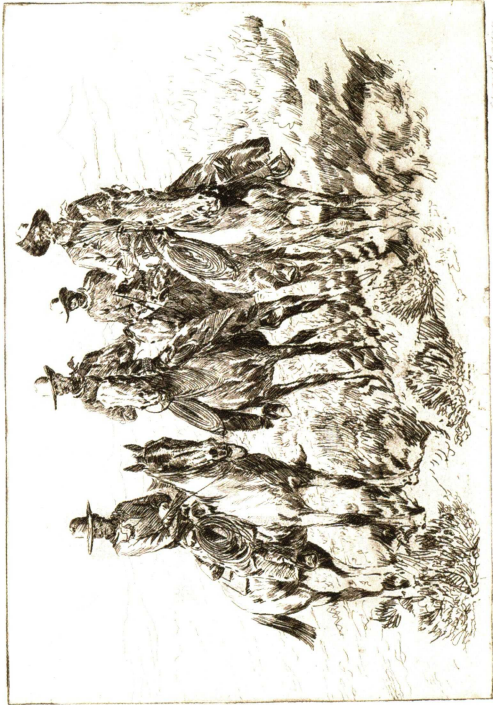
As in all such trials, the questions allowed little explanation. As things progressed, Billy thought that if the cowboys only knew what lured him among them, they would welcome him with open arms.

His daddy was one of those men who found quality in virgin things and tested and tamed the power of the ancient prairies by plowing up the grass and planting the alien crops of domesticity and commerce. He had moved his family often, searching out the newest piece of country connected to the beating heart of civilization by the artery of a railroad.

Well, let's see, they set the railroad of that line from Fort Worth about a hundred and fifty miles down the country from here. So, my lad, you're a good distance from home it seems. Did you tell your daddy you were leaving?"

"Nossir."

“Did you tell your mother you were leaving?”
“Yessir.”
“And what did she say?”
“She said don’t go, but she packed some things for me to take and gave me a little money to get by on.”
“And is that the gist and total of her reaction to your parting?”
“Well, she cried and sort of begged me not to go.”
“Then you must explain to us how you could defy and leave your mother that way.”
“My daddy whipped me with the plowlines.”
“I see. And what did you do to bring about this drastic action?”
“He caught me cowboying the plow horse and roping at a chicken.” This brought sounds of approval from the cowboys, even the jury. The judge admonished them with a stern gesture. But there were hisses and titters when Billy added, “He said he was gonna beat that cowboy notion out of me once and for all.”
His daddy talked of the cowboy’s unholy anarchy and how their ways were opposite of what God intended for men. He proved he held dear the exactitudes God had given him by passing them on to his son with emphasis—that is, he beat his son often for lessons.
“So you left your dear mother weeping?”
“Yessir.”
“And how long, my young lad, have you been gone from your mother’s door?”
“I can’t say, but I left the day before my birthday, which was March the first.”
“Son, are you telling this jury you left your mother crying on the day before the anniversary of the day she brought you with love and hope into the world?”
Yessir.
He had lain sick and angry in the night after that worst beating of his life, dreading tomorrow’s following of the plow, then dreaming in a short fitful sleep of riding out horseback. He rose a couple of hours before dawn and was putting some supplies together when his mother came to him with a soft and worried voice. “Why are you rustling about so, Billy, this early in the morning?” “I’m fixin’ to leave, Momma.” “No, Billy, no. Go back to sleep and I’ll speak to him.” “What could you say to help?” “It’s nearly spring and the fieldwork starts soon. He’ll need your help.” “He’s always saying I don’t pull my own weight.” “He’s harsh from constant worry, son. Oh, Billy, fourteen years ago tomorrow you were born and he was the proudest man in the world. You were his first son.” “Tell him his first son said goodbye.” “You’re his only son left.” “Tell him I said goodbye.”
She could have awakened her husband but instead rolled food up in some scant bedding and gave Billy three dollars from a jar. She followed him out, collapsed against her garden gate and wept as he went away.
“So that means you’ve been gone nearly three months. Let’s find out what other crimes you might have committed during the time subsequent to your breaking your dear mother’s heart. Trace for the jury, if you will, your wayward path since that time. Where did it lead you?”



JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *Ranahans*, etching on paper. Gilcrease 2199.1794.



JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *The Trail Herd with Remuda and Chuck Wagon*, etching on paper. Gilcrease 2199.1793.

“I went down to the railroad and stayed there a while till I met Mr. Oliver. He asked me if I wanted to go to work and I told him I wanted a cowboy job.” The judge again admonished the audible approval of the gallery. “He took me home with him, and I worked for him till the other day when I came riding out this way.”
“So old Pike Oliver took you in and gave you a job?”
“Yessir.”
“The timetable you gave us reveals that you stayed but a short while. Was there trouble between you and the Olivers? I might inform you that these boys and I know no more wonderful people than Pike and May Oliver and their lovely daughters, and we know he runs a good outfit.”
“Nossir, that’s not it at all. They were very nice to me.”
He would never forget how as they topped the rise Mr. Oliver pulled up the wagon team so he could allow Billy to look down the ridge on the Oliver Ranch headquarters tucked in the long oxbow of a creek with a high bank to the north, and cottonwoods lofted above the rock house ringed with vine bowers and a yard of watered grasses and rock lain pathways. A sturdy barn and set of pens filled out the picture. When they approached the house, a woman came walking fast, waving eager greetings, and two girls near Billy’s age came running past her. It was a warm family reunion that made Billy’s breast swell with a sudden surge of loneliness. He did not want to smudge the picture and stood opposite the wagon from them till Mr. Oliver called him over to introduce him.
They decked him out and rigged him up with clothing and tack left by boys who were not called by the gods to the work and had left things behind in their haste to get back to the settled world, or who had been killed by the work. He took some hazing and teasing from bunkhouse mates, but he learned quickly how to be in the right place at the right time, and it seemed he might have been born with the cowboy skills.
“Okay, let us accept for the moment that you caused no trouble, violated no trust at that good place. Tell the jury when you left the Oliver ranch.”

"Early yesterday morning."
 "And tell the jury, Billy, why, after being treated so well, you left that place so soon."
 "Mr. Oliver told me it looked to him like I wanted to be a cowboy and said I would make a good one if I set out to do it. He said he probably wouldn't have his place much longer because he felt like things were crowding in on him around there, so he told me to ride out this way and find a big outfit to join up with and show 'em my stuff."
 "My boy," Mr. Oliver began that morning as he sat Billy down by the tack room door for a long talk, "this used to be a good-sized outfit we had here with the open range, but it's getting all titled and taken up now. You can only run cattle where you can pay for the land and the big syndicates are cornering it all. There are still some big outfits out there trailing the cattle north, so while there's yet time it's my advice that you go hire on with one of 'em and soon you'll be makin' 'em sit back and take notice. It will bother Mrs. Oliver awful bad, but you wouldn't want to stay with us long anyway when things start changing."
 "So you pulled up and left the Oliver place and rode out here to be a cowboy, you are telling us?"
 "Yessir."
 The gallery, even the cowboys on the jury, whooped with approval again and was shushed by the wagon boss.
 The prosecutor, realizing the cowboys were liking this kid more and more, seemed for the briefest moment a bit distracted, rubbing his chin as he thought of a more damning tactic. "Hmm, and you just came riding off out here to be a cowboy, you are telling us?"
 "Yessir."
 In the first hours of his ride out on the morning the land rolled like the ocean late in a storm, growing calmer with each passing mile until in the evening it became calm as a still pond with breezes making ripples on the surface. The level terrain — its colors shades of dun to green shifting with the sun and wind on the grass — was all alike everywhere, but the clear space of it made his breast swell. He suppered on a prairie sundown and then rode a while in the night gazing in that mirror of the mind where people look themselves over. Watching himself horseback on the prairie, he saw what looked like a cowboy, and this pleased him nearly to aching. That night he slept by a playa lake and rode all the next day, entering in the late afternoon the breaklands of the river to the north.
 "No mischief to here, you say?"
 "Nossir."
 "Well, your honor, I think we have proved a good case against this young scamp, established sufficient guilt to deserve any punishment. I'm through with the questioning and rest my case."
 "All right, Cookie, the wagon boss said, "do you want to question the boy and try to get him out of this."
 "You bet, your honor, I surely do."
 "Then have at it."
 "Young feller," the defender asked his client, "did you not tell us, tell this jury of tried and true blue cowboys here, that it was your intention to come aridin' out here and make yourself a cowhand they'd surely admire?"
 "Yessir." The gallery and jury once again expressed approval.
 "I rest my case."

FACING: JOHN EDWARD BOREIN,
The Stray-A-Way, oil on canvas.
 Gilcrease 0137.1243.



“All right,” the wagon boss said, “the way we will handle the final arguments is this way: Cookie, you will say what you have to say for the boy first, and then Temple will have his say. Then the jury will vote and I will pass sentence. So, have your say, Cookie.”

He took up his fiddle and played and sang a song about a dying cowboy who wouldn’t see his mother when the work was done in the fall. This only served to make the cowboys misty eyed, though more so, of course, for their own danger than the kid’s predicament. After several verses, the judge told him to sit down, his time was up.

It came the suited prosecutor’s turn. He swept his hat off and slightly tilted in a bow, humbly entreating the jury, subtly taking command. Holding the lapels of his coat in the grand manner, he spoke with the best voice Billy Deaver would ever hear, and his sounding filled all the night air.

“I know the soft places of your hearts, my friends. I know you have some feeling for this lad of a tender age who comes to follow on the long hard trail you have blazed on the history of our beloved range. But I know, too, that such sympathy is not enough to soothe the ache his story has brought to your hearts. And I know, my good cowboys, I know that because you once held to the ambition he holds to now, you find in him a guilt that is also your own. For who among you does not carry somewhere in your mind that picture of your mother weeping, of your sister or sweetheart clutched and bowed with tears as you ride away? And

which of you does not feel, to quote the poet, the memory falling drop by drop in sleep upon the heart, swelling it with a sadness too great for the breast to contain. But duality courses its steady way, nature strikes its balance, freedom brings its burdens, and now you eat dust, nurse pain, you shudder and sweat and live in loneliness, and the high yelping and laughter only measure by their echoes how great and empty the loneliness is. You bury comrades and ride ever nearer your own lonely graves. For you have left your mothers weeping.

“But let us look for a moment to reason for aid, for in reason you might find release from the burden, expiation from your guilt. The ancient fathers gave sacrifice to please the gods who dealt their hands, asking a better draw the next time around. Often, for the greater forgiveness and the better hand to

play, they offered up the most pleasing among them. Abraham, Father Abraham offered his beloved son, Isaac, for the altar. This young Billy Deaver is, I must confess, the kind of boy you could take among you and hold in high esteem, but I say to you that he is not as precious to you as little Isaac was to his daddy Abraham! No! And he has broken his mother’s heart! Yes! And Isaac, I would remind you, was innocent of any such offense to his dear mother, Sarah! So now I beseech you to find this boy guilty of that sad offense, and ask that divine judgment speak to your hearts the blessed assurance that the guilt he carries to his young grave contains the collective guilt of all you cowboys who have left a mother or



JOHN EDWARD BOREIN, *Chuck Line Rider*, etching on paper. Gilcrease 2199.1794.

sweetheart weeping. And may you have peace in your hearts through the sleep of your prairie nights far from the ladies you love, the ladies who love you and wish you with them.”

The words on his voice had filled the night and space so full they pressed hard on the listeners’ hearts, and, as he spoke, the first glint of a tear in the firelight set loose a contagion, and by the time he closed his argument there was not a dirty cheek left unmoistened with tears. Even little Billy Deaver wept, and if he were asked he could not have said whether it was from the eloquence that grabbed and shook all their hearts or for the prospect with which the speech presented him. After but a moment of this quiet weeping, a bravo brought on yells of appreciation from the gallery that lasted until the horses threatened to break loose and the wagon boss brought order back to the crew.

The jury joined the gallery backslapping and shaking the hand of the prosecutor, but once reconvened by the judge, it arrived at a verdict in about thirty seconds. That’s when the wagon boss pronounced the sentence and ordered the wagon tongue hoisted with the noose. Then the cookie wheedled and fiddled his appeal, and since his earlier sad song had not won his client’s freedom, he changed his strategy and sang a bawdy ballad. This time he reduced the cowboys to rolling in the grass with laughter, and the wagon boss relented and allowed Billy to wrestle the dwarf hoodlum on appeal. And now the kid lay in the grass, exhausted beyond caring.

The dwarf hoodlum stood off to the side, his shirt torn. He was sweating but hardly breathing hard and the man in the suit came up to him and shook his hand. “Good fight,” he said. And then, “Bring my horse over here, and while you’re at it bring some damp rags to wash the abrasions and heated brow of this fine young cowboy.”

As the dwarf turned away the man knelt beside Billy, lifted him to sitting and brushed grass from him with a gentle touch. “There’s lots of life left in you yet, and lots of character to carry it along. That amazing hoodlum can outwrestle most of these grown men with the wagon, wears ‘em down, and I venture to say few of them would last as long as you did. It is only slightly less my pleasure than I am sure it is yours for me to tell you to forget the trial and the verdict and the noose. They play hard out here. And I am permitted to say you have been duly baptized into the cowboy life. If you want to work for this outfit—and it’s a good one—you are on the payroll come morning.”

As he shook Billy’s hand, tears came to his eyes, and as he gave him a quick hug and pat on the back, young Billy Deaver weakly wept and laughed.

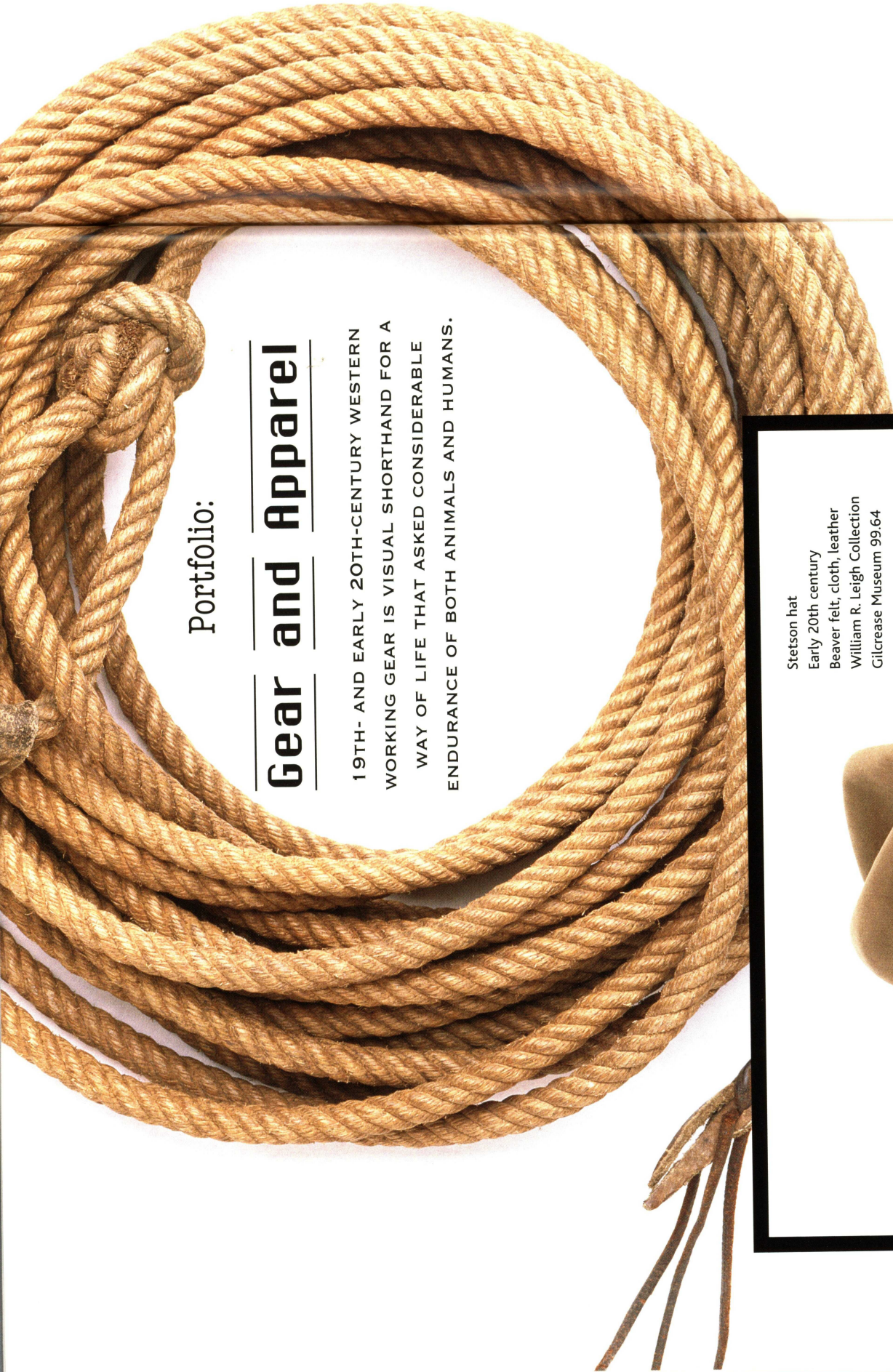
“Look after him boys,” the man said as he mounted his horse, “he’s a good one. I’ve got to ride miles and cross the river in time to get some shuteye before the morrow’s more binding legalities demand my attention.” He rode away in the darkness.

The wagon boss and the cookie attended Billy as the man requested. “Young feller,” the cookie said, “you’ve been tried and found true by the best. Do you know who that man was?”

“Nossir.”

“Well, I guess your momma and daddy have told you about the Raven, old Sam Houston, hero of the revolution, President of the Republic and Governor of the State, The Father of Texas. Well, that was Temple, old Sam’s boy. Some say he makes an even better speech than his daddy. We don’t have much show away off out here, so we’re always mighty glad when he comes ridin’ to our wagon.”

Buck Ramsey spent his teens and twenties on ranches along the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle. He once told an interviewer, “For some years back there I rode among the princes of the earth . . . A horse tougher than me ended all that, and I have since been a stove-up cowpuncher trying to figure out how to write about the cowboy life.” Confined to a wheelchair, he became the foremost keeper of traditional cowboy songs and a contemporary cowboy poet without peer. His albums include *Rolling Uphill from Texas* (1992) and *My Home It was in Texas* (1994). In 1995, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded Buck the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship, our nation’s highest recognition of folk culture. Buck was inspired by the classics throughout his life. His famous poem “As I Rode Out on the Morning,” took its stanza scheme from Pushkin. For its plot, Buck drew on his own short story, “The Wagon Incident,” published here for the first time. “Anthem,” reprinted on page 47 of this issue of *Gilcrease Journal*, is the prologue to that poem. Buck Ramsey died in 1998. A new collection of his writing, including “As I Rode Out on the Morning” (retitled “Grass”) and “The Wagon Incident,” is due out in 2005.



Portfolio:
Gear and Apparel

19TH- AND EARLY 20TH-CENTURY WESTERN
WORKING GEAR IS VISUAL SHORTHAND FOR A
WAY OF LIFE THAT ASKED CONSIDERABLE
ENDURANCE OF BOTH ANIMALS AND HUMANS.

Lariat
Late 19th century
Hemp, leather
William R. Leigh Collection
Gilcrease Museum 79.1

Branding Iron
Late 19th century
Steel
Gilcrease Museum 66.164



Stetson hat
Early 20th century
Beaver felt, cloth, leather
William R. Leigh Collection
Gilcrease Museum 99.64

Stetson

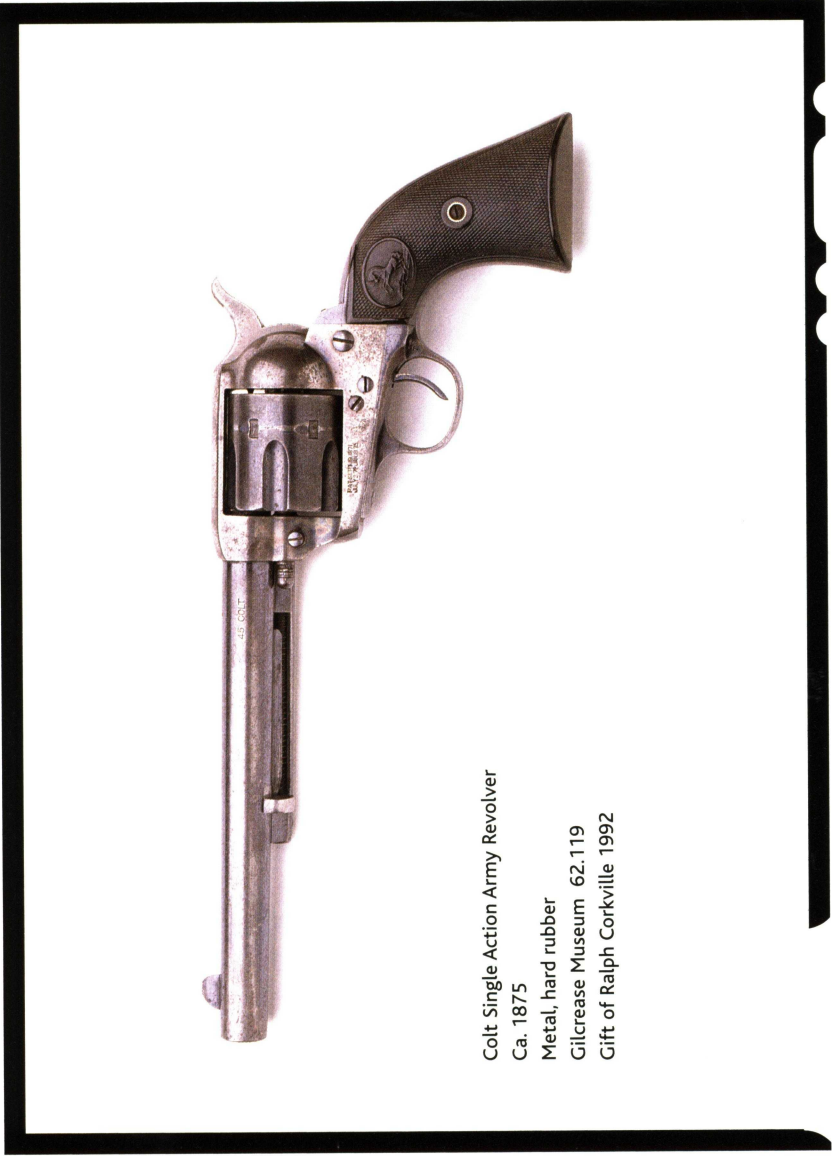
A hat was perhaps the most versatile implement of a cowboy's daily outfit. It offered protection against the elements—and could also be used to gather water, fan a fire, or feed a horse. Hats said a lot about their wearers' status, origins, recent history, and habits in the nineteenth century, and apparently they still do. "Pre-soiled" cowboy hats with convincing sweat-stained hatbands and thumb-smudged crowns are available for purchase on the Internet.

lariat

The word lariat is derived from Spanish. It refers to a specific type of rope originally used by Mexican vaqueros to catch livestock. A rider's saddle horn provides an anchor for the lariat during cattle roping.

brand

Branding irons were developed to mark livestock with unique symbols of ownership. Designs were sometimes creative but often simply employed the initials of the owner.



Colt Single Action Army Revolver
Ca. 1875
Metal, hard rubber
Gilcrease Museum 62.119
Gift of Ralph Corkville 1992

boots

Even though, like a four-wheel-drive vehicle that mainly sees asphalt, many cowboy boots these days seldom see a horse, their design is all about riding. The high tops offered protection from thorny brush and the pointed toes allowed easy placement into the stirrup of a saddle.

revolver

The Colt Single Action Revolver became a useful tool for protection and security on the open range. The “six gun” offered quick and effective assistance in the dispatching of snakes, road agents, and other varmints.

spurs

The impact on American culture of our neighbors to the South has been a fact of Western life for centuries. Spurs were introduced to the western range by Spanish and Mexican horsemen. Besides their function as a riding implement, spurs were also an important accessory in cowboy fashion. Designs were often elaborate and called attention even out of the saddle. “Spurs that jingle, jangle, jingle” were as embedded in the sound track of the Old West as the sound of horses clip clopping over dry earth.



Spur
Late 19th century
Iron
Gilcrease Museum 66.2



Cowboy boots
early 20th century
Leather, dyes
William R. Leigh Collection
Gilcrease Museum 87.14 a&b

Chaps
Late 19th century
Leather, fur, metal, cotton cloth
Gilcrease Museum 84.1932



Horse bit
Late 19th century
Iron
Gilcrease Museum 66.62



bit

This Mexican style ring bit was originally connected to a leather headstall and reins. Bits were essential to cowboys in the control of a horse while riding.

chaps

Cowboys often wore leather chaps when riding through tall brush to protect their legs from scratches and cuts. “Wooly” chaps like these were covered with fur for added protection.

BY PETE FROMM

Zeno's Paradox



HIS TIMING, the last thing that should have crossed my mind, was not the greatest—my half-finished apps for grad school scattered on the floor beside my desk, the one for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on top, my advisor sure it's a lock. After Mom's call, while I dug the winter clothes out of the back of the closet, I checked the internet for road conditions from Washington State University to the Middle of Nowhere, North Dakota. I couldn't resist checking Boston's as well. Snowing there too, but not blowing fifty miles an hour. I pictured big goosedown flakes easing onto Boston Common like on those candy tins Mom collects. Not a single road closure.

As usual, North Dakota is littered with drifted-shut roads. I've held the wheel cocked to the north against the wind since leaving the Badlands. The snow tearing through the lights looks almost alive. The only thing out here that does. Home.

My speed has deteriorated steadily since Billings, the cumulative time creeping higher and higher. Just outside of Glendive, leaving the interstate behind, I'm creeping along at forty, forty-one, which will leave me with a total elapsed drive time of twenty hours, seven minutes. Usually, with seven minute fueling stops, and a highway average of seventy-three, and fifty flat on the gravel, I achieve an elapsed time of fourteen hours, twenty-one minutes.

Pete Fromm's latest novel, *As Cool As I Am*, earned him an unprecedented fourth Pacific Northwest Booksellers Literary Award. Earlier winners were his novel *How All This Started*, story collection *Dry Rain*, and memoir *Indian Creek Chronicles*. He has published four other story collections, as well as more than a hundred stories in magazines. He lives with his family in Great Falls, Montana.

FACING: GENE KLOSS, *Zero Weather*, drypoint etching on paper. Gilcrease 1437-833.

When I hit the drifts, the wheel lunges north, and though I stuffed the grill full of cardboard before I left, the inside of the windshield is covered with thickening frost. I scrape at it with a cassette case, but I'm losing ground. I slump lower and lower to peer out, driving reflector post to reflector post. Now and then I hit thirty miles an hour, then new gusts force me back down, my timeline unraveling. Even the tape player's given up in the cold, groaning out slurred versions of the songs that were supposed to keep me awake. I haven't seen a soul since leaving the interstate.

Ted, my roommate, is probably studying, putting another pot of coffee through his desk top machine. The thick plantation smell of it, and him, ripe in the overheated room—something I've barely been able to stand—is now something I feel, like my view, being buried by frost.

I almost lose it through a drift, and as the wheel spins through my mittens, I remember Dad's strange cackle as he'd pound through these snowbanks, reaching a big hand free to thump me on the shoulder, the chest, finding a piece of me no matter which way I'd tumbled, shouting, "Nearly got us that time, Bucko!" I loved doing that with him.

On my own though, it's different, and I grind on, wrapping the sleeping bag tighter around my legs, only my hands poking out to keep the wheel canted against the push of wind, my foot on the gas huge in the packs I haven't once worn at school. Everything I'm wearing is from the ranch; rough things to keep people working in places they were never intended even to survive.

I only had these clothes with me at all because Dad caught me trying to leave them behind. "What if the power goes out?" he asked. "What if you slide off the road?"

I gave him a look. "It's a city, Dad. The power doesn't go out."

"You think a city can stop snow?" he asked. "That your calculations can stop cold?"

I pulled the filthy coveralls from his hand, snagged the enormous felt-lined boots under an arm and tossed them into the back of the most broken-down ranch truck—the one he was letting me take. "Okay?"

He handed me my Elmer Fudd, complete with ear flaps, the mittens I'm wearing now, sheepskin snagged here and there by barbed wire, the fleece poking through. He looked all around me, like there was something he wanted to say, but all he came up with was, "People get cold in Washington, too, Bucko."

But they wear pile! I wanted to shriek. They wear down; puffy, filmy nylon shells that wouldn't last a second here. None of it stained with diesel, with gumbo, with cow shit. But I kept quiet. I'd once tried to explain Mandelbrot Fractals to him, showing him the gorgeous

pictures on my computer screen—the chaotic proliferation of points repeating, how by entering the correct numbers into his equation, with normal numbers on the x axis, and negative on y—but he'd interrupted, asking what possible good it was to any living person, "Other than that Mandlingbote fellow?"

The truck lurches through more drifts, always a little deeper than the ones before. I'm close to the ranch though, guessing I'll make it through before things shut down completely. I glance at the speedometer. A twenty-two hour pace now. Just in time to be snowed-in.

Dad, Mom told me over the phone, was stable, already demanding to get out, so much to do before calving started. Only at the end of our conversation did she finally let herself wonder how much he could do with just the one arm.

He'd been trying to feed once more before it got bad. Apparently he'd finished the Slough Creek bunch, then couldn't bear the thought of driving back

the miles in the black with all those untidy scraps of hay in the Buster. Mom wasn't exactly clear. I pictured the metal bed polished by the miles of unfurled hay, slick with the first dusting of snow, the metal teeth whirring. In the cold, the dark, I wondered if Dad was for once wearing gloves—though I can only picture his big, raw fingers stiff with cold, fumbling with wire, with twine, with pliers—some kind of icy metal tool. The pluck of the teeth, designed to shred the big round bales, must have been so fast that it probably felt just like something to jerk away from, until he realized it had him.

Had he pulled back, tearing himself loose? Or at the elbow had the steel simply munched all the way through; insulated coveralls, sweatshirt, wool shirt, union suit; skin, flesh, bone?

He'd driven himself the eight miles from Slough Creek back to the house, with the tractor door flopped open, his arm wedged upright in the crease of the hinge, his belt cinched teeth-tight around the stub as the blizzard whirled around him in the cab. He did this, my mother said, to slow the movement of the blood. "Thought it might help if it froze shut, too," he told her. When he reached the ranch he waited on the porch while she called Williston, got the ambulance started their way. No helicopter in this weather. He'd sat in the back seat of her Olds while she drove toward their rendezvous, so he could keep his arm out the window. "If it thaws now it'll just start spurting again," he'd told her.

Then, as Dad had undoubtedly been doing since the lightning flash of steel through bone, Mom worried about the feeding, about how long neighbors could afford to lend a hand. How long they could count on friends, when family was available.

Family. Me. Since I wasn't doing anything else. What if I'd already made it out, I wondered, all the way to M.I.T? Only nine months away. Could they still have yanked me back from there? Would I still have come?

There's only about two inches of windshield left un-iced, but I know the way by heart. First the sharp left, leaving the pavement behind, then six point six miles of decent gravel, then the right, onto our road,

the rutted mud frozen into canyons and peaks, all covered over with drifts. Not a track cuts any of it, as if I'm the first living soul to ever find myself so horribly lost.

I make the final right. Twenty two minutes to cover the six point six. Exactly eighteen miles per hour. The last four point four will take fourteen minutes, forty seconds. The joys of the theoretical math major.

When I was just a tiny kid, Dad would tell me our speed, ask me our time. He got a huge kick out of it, showing me off to whoever might stop by; hunters mostly, the rare neighbor. Later, long after the novelty had worn off, I'd calculate everything just to drive him mad. "Six minutes, forty seconds, we'll be home," I'd say, glancing away from the speedometer just long enough to see his jaw tighten, see him stand a little harder on the gas to make me not so smart. I'd adjust my calculations, ticking them off until he tried distracting me with questions about which cattle we should feed next, from which yard, which way would make the hay sort out most efficiently. He'd rattle off beef prices, feed prices, shipping and feedlot costs. "Figure on something that matters," he'd insist, when it was only what he knew best, how he could prove he'd always know more than me.

In return, I'd stumped him into a fury with Zeno's Paradox. "It doesn't matter, Dad. If we use half the hay in the Slough Creek yard, then half of what's left, and then half of what's left, and half of what's left, there'll always be half of what we just used, forever."

He sneered at first, but then got stuck, and I'd picked at it endlessly. In the end, for the only time in my life, he told me to shut up.

Ten fingers, take away five, leaves what? Two arms, take away one.

The creek cut just before the horse barn is black, not white, and I stand on the brakes, sliding to a stop just before the wall of cattle, lumped together in the only windbreak they can find. They barely roll their eyes at my lights, just shuffle their feet to the sound of my horn. Their windward sides are white, and they look sugar-coated on top. I rev the engine, but they ignore me.

I inch forward, touching them with the bumper to get them to move. Dad would have a fit. "What if one puts a leg under your bumper? Don't you ever think?"

But it's the money that worries him, not the living, breathing, animal. Trying to make me learn, to take this place under my skin the same way he had, he kept me in 4-H long after I wanted out. Catching me talking to my steer as I brushed it out before a judging, he laughed but then bent low to peer at me. "It's not a pet, for Christ's sake," he said, his voice loud when he added, "They're just cash on the hoof, Bucko. Hell, do the math."

The cattle close back around me like a shroud as I climb out of the cut and see the blot of the house, as dark against the snow as the cattle, ghostly in the glow of the snow-muted yard light. In front of it sits the tractor, something so out of place—not backed neatly into the shop, plugged in, fueled up, pointing out toward the next day's feeding—that I nearly bang into it.

It's almost two in the morning, but the tractor finally makes me think straight enough to realize that Mom and Dad aren't here. They're in Williston, at the hospital. Drawn on by the sucking pull of the ranch, I've overshoot by a hundred miles. They've done it to me too, I see, made me charge first for the ranch instead of any living, breathing person.

I edge alongside the tractor and stop at last. Twenty-two hours, seven minutes. Four gas stops. Still, with the early speed, an average of 47.29 miles per hour. Tugging the sleeping bag out from around my legs, I stagger into the crazy lash of the storm. There's a smear of blood against the storm door that stops me. It's Dad's blood this time, not some animal's.

Making myself move, I fall inside. The smell hits first; musty and hayish, same as ever, the outside not quite kept out, and even with the drive still frozen into my bones, I feel the chill, every room kept just warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing. I hear the trickle of water left running, Mom a machine as well oiled as any of Dad's: turning down the thermostat, shutting off the lights, cracking the faucets to leave a flow. All with Dad out on the porch.

I cut through the kitchen to the hallway, just far

enough to reach the thermostat. I crank it, smiling at the thump of the furnace kicking in, knowing it'll be clicking and groaning all night.

Beside the phone, the long dangle of its pulled-out cord, the stove is clean, and I know exactly what I'll find in the refrigerator. And sure enough, the pot's there, the night's stew she had ready for his return. I pull it out and set it on a burner. At least it isn't in Tupperware, I think. At least she didn't take that kind of time.

I'll call Williston, I decide, as soon as I get a little food into me.

Then, as the stew heats, as the house slowly warms, I stand in the quiet kitchen, still dressed in everything I tried to leave here, and I think of the cattle. Huddled in that tiny draw, I doubt they've had a feeding in the last thirty-two hours. A neighbor could have come in, but in these Northers they'll let them sit if they have to, rather than draw them up into the blast of the wind to eat on the flats where the Buster can leave its windrows. There's a point where they balance each other out, food or shelter, and either way they're nearing the edge of no return. Death's own infinite series. Hell, Bucko, do the math.

I shut off the burner beneath the stew and, turning my back to the kitchen, the phone, I stomp out to the mudroom, tug my ear flaps back down and wrestle into Dad's oversized coat.

Outside I lean against the keening wind and needling snow. There's no point in trying to start the tractor. Tomorrow I'll lay out the extension cord, plug in the heater, fuel it by hand, but tonight I just grab a hay fork from the barn and toss it into the back of my truck.

At the nearest hay lot I jump out to get the gate. It's tighter than Satan's whore, as Dad brags about all his gates, and I hug the anchor post against my chest, hauling with both arms on the gate post, pushing at the loop of barbless wire, trying to inch it over the top of the post.

Finally it gives, though for a moment I think it's my arms that have cracked, my chest that has split. I let the sticks and barbed wire fall in the path, then drive over them, wheeling around to the lee side of the long rows of rolled bales, pounding through the drift that's collected there. In the headlight's glimmer

I retrieve the hay fork and step up to the stacks. With the razor knife from Dad's coat pocket, I slash the twine. I've never tried to drive a fork into one of these huge cylindrical bales, and don't even know that it's possible.

Lifting the fork over my head, I bring it down with all my strength, the tines slipping full length through the hay and sticking there. Wiggling back and forth, finally tugging down till I'm afraid the ash handle will snap in the brittle air, I wedge off a slab of compressed hay the length of the entire bale, five feet worth, maybe four inches thick, two feet wide. Three and a third cubic feet. Driving the fork in, prying off another slab, I begin to calculate how many times I'll have to do this to feed all the cattle. It's not something that is possible, and I hear again that laugh of Dad's. Friendly, not mean, amused that this isn't something I've taken to yet.



When I've reduced a pick-up's worth of the bale to this kind of rubble, I'm sweating in my clothes. I retreat to the truck, climb in to swing it alongside my pile of broken hay, but the tires spin, and I have to climb out for the chains.

I chain up all four, lying down in the dark and cold, wriggling beneath the truck, the snow finding every single chink in my armor, my fingers wooden in their work gloves as I struggle to close the chains against the inside edges of the tires. But when I'm done, I've turned the truck into something more like a tank and I load it with the hay and I'm off, crunching over the snow, the chains clattering against the pavement of frozen earth where the snow's blown clear.

I follow the upwind edge of the creek path, jumping out every few feet to pitch forkfuls of hay onto the heads and backs of the bunched cattle. I don't even bother shutting the door. I'm out of hay, it seems, before I've even started. I drive back to the yard for more, and picture Dad standing there, a rock against the solid wind, shaking his head.

On my next trip to the cattle, finally admitting how stupid this is, I detour to the house, take the time to plug in the tractor, lug out Jerry cans of fuel.

While the block heater starts its thaw, I keep taking nips from the hay with my fork, throwing them onto cattle I can barely see, trip after trip, eventually admitting that I can't face staying in the house without them, Mom and Dad, no matter how high I've cranked the heat.

There's still no trace of light in the east when I first give the tractor a try. Out in the wind, there's small cause for hope, but the engine cranks sluggishly and then fires, rattling violently. The cab light comes on and for a moment I can only stare at all the blood, hard and black and shiny, only now putting a name to the smell that hangs in the frozen air. Climbing back down, I catch my big boots on the steps,

stumbling to the ground, then inside, into the light and heat, waiting for the tractor to warm up. I try not to think of all the things he's done with his hands, a total far beyond my calculating

try not to think of all the things he's done with his hands, a total far beyond my calculating abilities, the whole life he built for himself and Mom. For me. He once made a bicycle for me, from scratch, welding together all sorts of scrap. It worked as well as anything he ever touched, but was so obviously not store-bought I hardly touched it.

Rather than stripping off any layers, I stay in the mudroom while the tractor rumbles outside. I try to breathe slowly. The tractor looks like a slaughterhouse, but it's not the blood that bothers me, it's the idea of him broken, him unable to do even one thing out here, that makes my breathing something I've got to think about.

When I climb back up into the tractor I slam the door behind me. I nearly back into my truck, out of practice at all of this, never very good to begin with.

But I bounce down through the creek cut, then

up to the hay yard. Without looking into the Hay Buster, hoping there's nothing of Dad caught in there that will jam anything, I load up two bales. I'm tempted to use the one I've mangled just so Dad won't see, but I'm afraid it won't feed right. Instead of leaving any windrows, I lift the chute and drive the edge of the cuts, spraying the hay in a green rain over the snow-crusteds backs of the cattle. The calves, persnickety feeders at the best of times, can eat it or not. It's up to them now.

I drive slowly, laying it in heavy. Then I turn and lumber up the road to Slough Creek.

The snow's still thick, but by the time I get over there dawn is finally edging the horizon. It helps as I creep past every depression, looking for where the cattle might be holed up. But they're where I guessed they'd be, a little group beneath the stock pond dike, more in the coulee by the dump. I spray the hay where I have to, then drop the chute and do it right where I can.

Finally, I back the tractor into the shop and plug it in, knowing I'll start over again this afternoon. I trudge across

the yard to the house, my truck already drifted in on the one side.

The heat hits like a fist, my cheeks, cut by wind and cold, ablaze, and as soon as I shake off my clothes, I twist the thermostat down to a reasonable level.

I turn the stew on again, and slip into my chair at the kitchen table, my bones feeling soft and rubbery. I scratch at the itch the old hat's left, my hair flattened and matted, then lean forward to put my head on my arms. I haven't slept in a long, long time.

But, at last, I lean back and hook the phone off the wall, slide the book from its shelf beneath. I've got nothing left I can pretend needs done first.

The hospital finds Mom in no time. "I'm at the ranch," I tell her first thing. "I've fed what I can, but it's pretty bad out here."

She answers, "Dad will be glad to know."

I nod. Of course he will. We don't say anything else for a moment. No, "How were the roads?" No, "When do you have to be back at school?" Nothing like that. Of course no, "Are you coming in to the hospital?"

I take a big breath. "How is he?"

"He's doing fine," she says, and while she goes on about the surgery, sewing up the tattered ends, I think, Fine?

"How long before you come back?" I ask.

She says that with as far out as we are, they want to keep him an extra few days, to make sure. Blood clots, things like that. "The weather too," she starts, but I know it will be a lot harder to snow Dad out of the ranch than it is to snow him in.

On my end I nod and nod, every word only what I expected.

At last I say, "Is he there?"

She says yes, but that he's sleeping. "He's on something for the pain," she whispers, and I realize she's been whispering all along. "It makes him groggy."

Dad admitting pain, I marvel. I once saw him jabbed by a post splinter, the wood sliding in so far it poked at the skin on the back of his hand. When he held it up to look at it, he only said, "Well, I'll be skinned for a weasel," an expression that made no more sense than the way he looked at his hand, only surprised and curious. Actually putting off the fencing a moment, he sat on the tailgate with his pocket knife and fencing pliers, performing his surgery.

"Mom," I say. "I have finals. Right now. This week."

There's a pause, a second when I swear I can hear them both breathing in the little, dim, hospital room. "Will you be able to get back out this afternoon?" she asks. To feed she means.

"I think so," I answer. "Unless the storm really starts laying down."

"They've got the weather channel here," Mom

says, and we're off on the weather, the arctic cold front, highs and lows, jetstreams. At one point she tells me the entire Florida orange crop is threatened.

"No kidding," I say.

"They say so." Then, when I don't keep up my end, she asks, "Wouldn't that be a shame?"

I think of the oranges, brown and shriveled, hard little nuggets dropping off iced branches. Up here it'll be upended cattle, gray-black hooves poking from white-blue drifts.

The stew on the stove starts to hiss. I say, "Mom, I've got to go."

"There's stew in the refrigerator," she tells me quickly, then goes on with where I'll find everything else I might need. Things I know by heart.

"Okay, Mom," I say, interrupting her. "Why don't you call when Dad's awake. He'll want to know what's going on."

"We will," she says, and before I can mention anything about how they should start thinking about hiring a ranch hand, how they should start thinking

of everything that's going to be different from now on, she hangs up. There's no thanks, of course. It would be like thanking me for breathing.

I push my chair back and retrieve the stew, find one of the hot pads Mom weaves, and set the pot down at my place, not bothering with a bowl or plate.

When I pull open the drawer for a spoon, mixed in with the silverware I find one of Dad's dry-mark pens, its white case smudged with black fingerprints. Picking it up, I glance to his chore board, where he'd pen in jobs for me not to forget, reminders even to himself of things that should get done. The only words on it now are "ear tags" and "TAXES." I can practically hear the thud and squeak of the smashed flat felt-tip.

I start to turn away, dig again for a spoon, when I see something else written into the top corner of the board, where it wouldn't get erased. It's smeared and faint, up there a long time, and I have to bend close to read my own name. JOHN. Again in capitals, but carefully written, not dashed down like TAXES.

CONRAD SCHWIERING,
Silent Solitude, oil on
canvas. Gilcrease
0137.2419.



Now what the hell could that mean? Write John? It'd be a first. The only letters I ever remember him writing were rare diatribes to Congressman, Senators. Send care packages to John? I can't help a grin at the idea.

Get John back? I wonder, and for an instant I picture him driving with the stump of his arm wedged into the tractor door. At first, truly my father's son, I'd thought it was lucky it was his left arm. That he could prop it in the door and still drive. Lucky.

But now, like the wild thoughts you get in the middle of any sleepless night, I picture him rolling up his sleeve, taking a last look at his so-strong arm, his belt off and ready for the tourniquet, his jaw tightening as he reaches into the whirring blur of the flail. A nasty bit of business, but the only way to bring the boy back.

Ridiculous as it is, it gives me a spook. It's odd it was his left hand; the one he'd need least, the one he wouldn't ordinarily be sticking into any machinery, the one he'd choose to do without if he had the choice to make. But it's only odd. Maybe he slipped. His hands are the only thing I can think that he wouldn't sacrifice to bring me back. They're his life.

I pull off the pen's cap, still staring at that shadow of my name, an incalculable conundrum. I reach out and at the bottom corner of the board write "E=mc2." In high school, freshman year, after the hour long bus ride, it was the first thing I wrote on the blackboard every day in Algebra class. My signature move, I think now, embarrassed. One of the few things Dad never knew.

It was a joke, I pretended, rather than an inspiration. I never saw how strange all those other ranch kids must have thought I was.

I wonder if Dad will erase it before asking what it means, wondering what I could have come up with in just a few days alone on the ranch that he wasn't aware of himself. But I know he'll scrub it out, another of my annoying calculations—a childish trick that somehow grew to something that took me away.

or an instant I picture him driving with the stump of his arm wedged into the tractor door.

Then, pen cap clenched in his teeth, he'll take a second to think before beginning to write down my instructions.

I drop the pen back into the drawer, then shrug the sleeve of my old shirt down over my hand. I rub it hard against my name, making even the shadow disappear. It isn't something he'd want me seeing. No matter what it was up there for, I know it wasn't meant for me.

In the place my name had been written, I sketch in, "Ranch Hand." I put a question mark before and after it.

If, before I reach Boston, I have to travel half way there, and then half the remaining distance, and then half...

The scrape of my chair is loud in the empty house, and I sit down in front of Mom's stew. Fiddling with my spoon, I can't stop glancing around, wondering what there is to do next.

The stew burns my tongue and I get up again.

The cattle are freezing and it's light enough now out there to see. That last steer, for 4-H, brought four hundred and fifty dollars. I called him Kepler. A steer named Kepler. Dad never knew about that either.

I shrug back into Dad's coat and then, before stepping out into the watery gray-white light of day, the lashing snow, I take up Dad's marker once more. Across the center of the board I scrawl, "Send out apps anyway." I don't know what "anyway" means, any more than I know what Dad meant with "JOHN." It's his name too.

Then I go out to see about the cattle.



WILLIAM R. LEIGH, *The Round Up*, oil on canvas. Gilcrease 0137.719.

Anthem

BY BUCK RAMSEY

And in the morning I was riding
Out through the breaks of that long plain,
And leather creaking in the quieting
Would sound with trot and trot again.
I lived in time with horse hoof falling;
I listened well and heard the calling:
The earth, my mother, bade to me,
Though I would still ride wild and free.
And as I flew out on the morning,
Before the bird, before the dawn,
I was the poem, I was the song.
My heart would beat the world a warning—
Those horsemen now rode all with me,
And we were good, and we were free.

We were not told, but ours the knowing
We were the native strangers there
Among the things the land was growing—
To know this gave us more the care
To let the grass keep at its growing
And let the streams keep at their flowing.
We knew the land would not be ours,
That no one has the awful pow'r's
To claim the vast and common nesting,
To own the life that gave him birth,
Much less to rape his mother earth
And ask her for a mother's blessing
And ever live in peace with her,
And, dying, come to rest with her.

Oh, we would ride and we would listen
And hear the message on the wind.
The grass in morning dew would glisten
Until the sun would dry and blend
The grass to ground and air to skying.
We'd know by bird or insect flying
Or by their mood or by their song
If time and mood were right or wrong
For fitting works and rounds to weather.
The critter coats and leaves of trees
Might flash some signal with a breeze—
Or wind and sun on flow'r or feather.
We knew our way from dawn to dawn,
And far beyond, and far beyond.

It was the old ones with me riding
Out through the fog fall of the dawn,
And they would press me to deciding
If we were right or we were wrong.
For time came we were punching cattle
For men who knew not spur nor saddle,
Who came with locusts in their purse
To scatter loose upon the earth.
The savage had not found this prairie
Till some who hired us came this way
To make the grasses pay and pay
For some raw greed no wise or wary
Regard for grass could satisfy.
The old ones wept, and so did I.

Do you remember? We'd come jogging
To town with jingle in our jeans,
And in the wild night we'd be bogging
Up to our hats in last month's dreams.
It seemed the night could barely hold us
With all those spirits to embold' us
While, horses waiting on three legs,
We'd drain the night down to the dregs.
And just before beyond redemption
We'd gather back to what we were.
We'd leave the money left us there
And head our horses for the wagon.
But in the ruckus, in the whirl,
We were the wolves of all the world.

The grass was growing scarce for grazing,
Would soon turn sod or soon turn bare.
The money men set to replacing
The good and true in spirit there.
We could not say, there was no knowing,
How ill the future winds were blowing.
Some cowboys even shunned the ways
Of cowboys in the trail herd days
(But where's the gift not turned for plunder?),
Forgot that we are what we do
And not the stuff we lay claim to.
I dream the spell that we were under;
I throw in with a cowboy band
And go out horseback through the land.

So mornings now I'll go out riding
Through pastures of my solemn plain,
And leather creaking in the quieting
Will sound with trot and trot again.
I'll live in time with horse hoof falling;
I'll listen well and hear the calling
The earth, my mother, bids to me,
Though I will still ride wild and free.
And as I ride out on the morning
Before the bird, before the dawn,
I'll be this poem, I'll be this song.
My heart will beat the world a warning—
Those horsemen will ride all with me,
And we'll be good, and we'll be free.

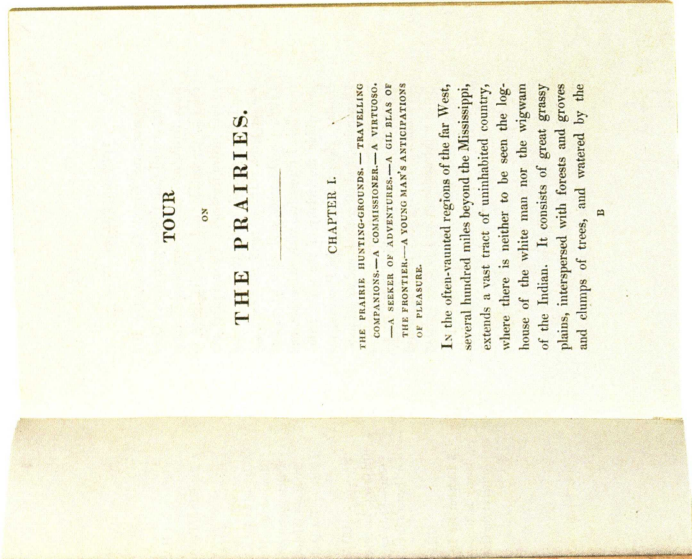


WILLIAM S. PRETTYMAN, *Cattle Herd (detail)*, photograph. Gilcrease 4326.3535.

FACING: CHARLES M. RUSSELL, *Through the Alkali*, oil on canvas. Gilcrease 0137.903.

Irving and His Tour of the West

BY JAMES P. RONDA



For most readers the name Washington Irving summons up images of places like Sleepy Hollow and the Hudson River Valley. Irving filled his books with characters like Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane. Even his popular biographies of Christopher Columbus and George Washington fit neatly into the structure of urbane, civilized story-telling Irving sought to promote. But for a brief time in the 1830s he abandoned those genteel narratives to write three vital, important books about the American West. At least for a moment Irving was fascinated by places like the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Now it was the Missouri and the Columbia, not the Hudson that captured his imagination. His characters were fur traders and adventurers the likes of John Colter, Edward Rose, and Joseph R. Walker. Even more telling, Irving made his own frontier journey in 1832 that provided the basis for his first western book.

Stories of adventure and romance had always fascinated Irving. But before 1830 those stories were set in England, Spain, and colonial New York. Irving's brief but important engagement with the West came much by accident. In 1832, while traveling in the East with Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtales and the count's tutor Charles Latrobe, Irving chanced to meet federal Indian Commissioner Henry L. Ellsworth. As part of the government's infamous Indian Removal policy, Ellsworth was bound for what is now eastern Oklahoma to evaluate lands set aside for dispossessed native people. Ellsworth invited Irving and his friends to join the expedition. After a long European sojourn, Irving was eager to re-establish himself with his American audience and nothing seemed better than a western adventure.

ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Pierre, A Rocky Mountain Trapper*, watercolor on paper. Gilcrease 0236.1060.



Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874) was one of the first American artists to see the Rocky Mountains and the only artist to actually witness a fur trappers rendezvous. In 1837 Miller chronicled, in sketches and words, the legendary fur trade era at the height of activity—during the annual rendezvous between the trappers who hunted fur-bearing animals and the traders who supplied furs to worldwide markets. He painted romantic landscapes and dramatic scenes of people that he encountered in the Far West in 1837.

Miller, who was born and raised in Baltimore, began his artistic training with Thomas Sully in Philadelphia. In 1833 he traveled to Paris to study painting at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and then to Rome to study at the English Life School. Returning to Baltimore, he opened an art studio, but it met with little success, and he relocated to New Orleans in 1837.

Soon after, he met a wealthy Scottish nobleman and British Army officer, Captain William Drummond Stewart, who

had made several trips to the American West. The adventurer engaged Miller to accompany him as an expedition artist on a journey to the Rocky Mountains.

Stewart's entourage joined an American Fur Company caravan guided by the legendary mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick, and early in the spring of 1837 the expedition departed for the Green River country in what is now Wyoming. Miller sketched constantly throughout the trip, often leaving camp at sunrise with the hunters and not returning until dusk. The caravan followed a route that would later become the Oregon Trail, passing through Fort Laramie and the South Pass before turning northward past the Wind River Mountains to Horse Creek, site of the 1837 rendezvous. Stewart was an honored guest and Miller was treated to countless unforgettable experiences during his stay in the mountains. Miller viewed the mountain men and the Native Americans as inhabitants of a wild and romantic landscape. His watercolor sketches

transformed them into idealized, yet carefully observed figures in dreamy and evocative settings.

Following the group's return from the West, Miller worked from his many sketches to produce oil paintings for Stewart. From 1840 to 1842 he worked at Murthy Castle in Scotland, Stewart's ancestral home, and then he returned to Baltimore. Over the next thirty years he based a successful painting career on portraiture and on reinterpreting sketches from his only trip to the West.

With many of his paintings, Miller supplied narrative descriptions, but he never published a written account of his western adventures. He did not pursue the documentary or potential scientific implications of his art. Yet his paintings express the spirit of the nineteenth century's romantic preoccupation with Native peoples and the American wilderness—and are some of the most beautiful images of the Far West ever created.





ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Watering Horses*,
oil on canvas. Gilcrease 0216.728.

What emerged from that fall, 1832 circuit through the southern plains was Irving's first western book. *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835) was more than a simple travelogue or a chatty guidebook to scenes of western wonder. Filled with descriptions of sweeping plains landscapes, dramatic chases and hunts, and memorable frontier characters, *Tour* quickly re-established Irving's reputation as a distinctively American writer.

Even before *Tour* was published, Irving was on to his second western book. By the fall of 1834 he and New York fur trade entrepreneur John Jacob Astor were deep into discussions about a book dealing with the western fur trade. Almost two decades earlier Astor had created the short-lived Pacific Fur Company, his grand scheme to monopolize the fur business up the Missouri and across the Rockies to the Pacific Northwest. Spurred on by the expansionist dreams of his Canadian friends and sometime rivals, Astor set in motion the first major American commercial venture in the West. One group of Astor employees led by Wilson Price Hunt made the second transcontinental crossing (1810-12) by an American expedition while the ship *Tonquin* sailed around Cape Horn to establish Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1811. This grand scheme was eventually defeated by the War of 1812 and the divided loyalties of Astor's Canadian employees. But Astor was determined that his bold enterprise not be forgotten; Irving was his choice as Astoria's official chronicler.

Overwhelmed by the great mass of letters, documents, and business papers Astor made available, Irving turned to his nephew Pierre M. Irving for help to organize the material. What emerged from that joint effort was *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (1836), Irving's most successful western book. Irving offered his readers a powerful story linking the fur trade and mountain man adventure to global business strategies and the imperial struggle in the West between the United States and Great Britain. Remarkably modern in its conception, *Astoria* was a book of continental dimension, taking its readers from New York board rooms and Montreal counting houses to remote trading posts on the Missouri and Columbia rivers. At the same time readers were treated to a full cast of memorable characters—everyone from presidents and tribal chiefs to common sailors and rough-handed trappers.

While busy writing *Astoria*, Irving met one of the early West's most colorful and enigmatic figures. Captain Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville—army officer, sometime fur trader, and perhaps a spy—had recently returned from a journey throughout the Rocky Mountain West. Bonneville's lively stories appealed to Irving and he eventually purchased the captain's papers for \$1000. But the captain's fur trade tales were more than Wild West adventures. From 1832 to 1835 Bonneville led parties of trappers on one less-than-successful trading trip after another. His misadventures led many to suspect that the officer was more interested in Great Britain's western ambitions than in stacking up beaver pelts. For Irving, Bonneville was one more example of the connection between the romance of the fur trade and the contemporary realities of imperial competition in the West. First published in 1837 as *The Rocky Mountains* and later retitled *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, the book was Irving's most fully realized portrait of mountain men and western Indians. In his earlier books western figures—especially Indians—were either noble savages or uncivilized cowards. With Bonneville, Irving managed to momentarily escape his own cultural biases to present native people as complex, interesting human beings.

No American writer before the Civil War had a greater hand in shaping what historian William H. Goetzmann calls "the West of the Imagination." Irving's West—a fantasy West eventually depicted in countless novels, paintings, and movies—was filled with action,

violence, hardship, and imperial intrigue. It was a largely male territory, a fur trade West before covered wagons, settlers, and railroads. Most important for Irving's readers, it was a West manifestly destined to become part of the United States. Irving's books established the themes and set the tone for the dime novels and the Wild West shows. They became the text for a colorful, romantic West that endures in the mythic landscape of the American imagination.

James P. Ronda holds the H.G. Barnard Chair in Western American History at the University of Tulsa and is a past president of the Western History Association. Among his many books are *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*, *Revealing America: Image and Imagination in the Exploration of North America, From Conflict to Conservation*, *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West*, *Voyages of Discovery: Essays on the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, and *Beyond Lewis and Clark: The Army Explores the West*.

Ronda's newest book is *Washington Irving: Three Western Narratives*.

Ronda has been a consultant and commentator for tv documentaries produced by PBS, Disney-Discovery, Arts and Entertainment Channel, C-SPAN, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and others.

ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Our Caravan En Route to the Rocky Mountains*, oil on canvas.
Gilcrease 0216.726.



EXCERPT

FROM *The Rocky Mountains: or, Scenes, Incidents,
and Adventures in the Far West Volume I,*

BY WASHINGTON IRVING

BEFORE WE ACCOMPANY CAPTAIN BONNEVILLE into the Crow country, we will impart a few facts about this wild region, and the wild people who inhabit it. We are not aware of the precise boundaries, if there are any, of the country claimed by the Crows; it appears to extend from the Black hills to the Rocky mountains, including a part of their lofty ranges, and embracing many of the plains and valleys watered by the Wind river, the Yellowstone, the Powder river, the little Missouri, and the Nebraska. The country varies in soil and climate; there are vast plains of sand and clay, studded with large red sand hills: other parts are grand and picturesque: it possesses warm springs, and coal mines, and abounds with game.



ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Encampment
of Crow Indians*, watercolor on paper.
Gilcrease 0236.1065.



ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Slim-a-co-che,
Crow Chief*, watercolor on paper.
Gilcrease 0236.1024.



ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Indians on Green River*, oil on canvas. Gilcrease 0126.732.

But let us give the account of the country as rendered by Arapooish, a Crow chief, to Mr. Robert Campbell, of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

"The Crow country," said he, "is a good country. The Great Spirit has put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you go out of it, which ever way you travel, you will fare worse.

"If you go to the south, there you have to wander over great barren plains; the water is warm and bad, and you meet the fever and ague.

"To the north it is cold; the winters are long and bitter, with no grass; you cannot keep horses there, but must travel with dogs. What is a country without horses!

"On the Columbia they are poor and dirty, paddle about in canoes, and eat fish. Their teeth are worn out; they are always taking fishbones out of their mouths. Fish is poor food.

"To the east, they dwell in villages; they live well; but they drink the muddy water of the Missouri—that is bad. A Crow's dog would not drink such water.

"About the forks of the Missouri is a fine country; good water; good grass; plenty of buffalo. In summer, it is almost as good as the Crow country; but in winter it is cold; the grass is gone; and there is no salt weed for the horses.

"The Crow country is exactly in the right place. It has snowy mountains and sunny plains; all kinds of climates and good things for every season. When the summer heats scorch the prairies, you can draw up under the mountains, where the air is sweet and cool, the grass fresh, and the bright streams come tumbling out of the snow banks. There you can hunt the elk, the deer, and the antelope, when their skins are fit for dressing; there you will find plenty of white bears and mountain sheep.

“In the Autumn, when your horses are fat and strong from the mountain pastures, you can go down into the plains and hunt the buffalo, or trap beaver on the streams. And when winter comes on, you can take shelter in the woody bottoms along the rivers; there you will find buffalo meat for yourselves, and cotton-wood bark for your horses: or you may winter in the Wind river valley, where there is salt weed in abundance.

“The Crow country is exactly in the right place. Every thing good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow country.”



ALFRED JACOB MILLER, *Trappers Starting for a Beaver Hunt*, watercolor on paper. Gilcrease 0236.1034.

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and literature of the
American West*

COVER

William Leigh

Arizona Wonderland, 1941

oil on canvas

Gilcrease 0137.1037

