

GILCREASE

J O U R N A L

How Myth



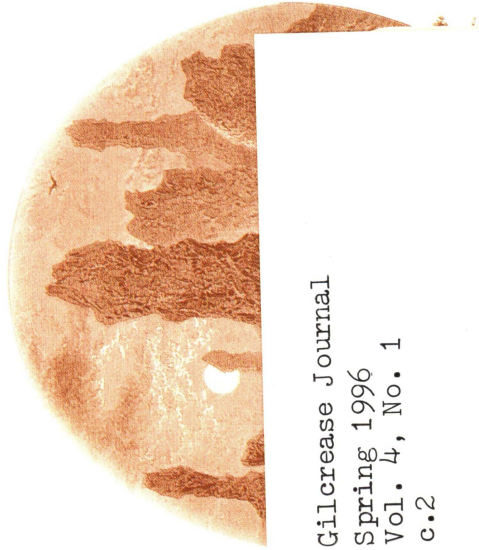
a n d

reality

converge

in the narrative of the West.

Spring
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IN
West Words

“What was written gave shape and substance to a West both imagined and real.”



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THE WESTERN MEMOIR

As we approach the millennium, the memoir is renewed as a vital literary form. In these excerpts from longer recountings, three unsparingly truthful writers recall their prairie girlhoods from the heart.

Mary Clearman Blew The Sow in the River

Teresa Jordan Legends

Edith Eudora Kohl A Shack on the Prairie

WEST WORDS

From desire and imagination springs a West that is part fiction and part fact, conveyed through the written word. Even Thomas Jefferson, in his instructions for the Lewis and Clark expedition, encoded a set of assumptions based on the language — not the direct experience — of the West.

James P. Ronda



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PULP FICTION

Writing for the Western Magazines

Before the movies, before television, this is how the West was spun. On coarse, cheap paper, rough as a pair of old chaps and emanating its own peculiar earthy perfume, monthly and weekly installments of down and dirty adventure filled the western pulp magazines.

Elmer Kelton

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READING WESTERN WRITERS

A selection of annotated classics available in the Museum Shop.

Linda Dolph and James P. Ronda

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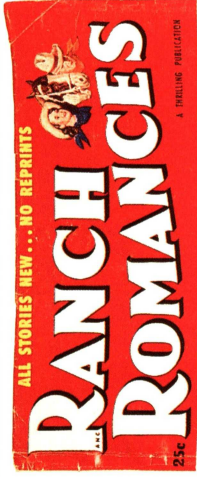
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“As memory saves, discards, retrieves, fails to retrieve, its logic may well be analogous to the river’s inexorable search for the lowest ground. The trivial and the profound roll like leaves to the surface.”

PAGE ONE: Vignette from page 168, vol. 2, of *Picturesque America*, published in 1874, showing Witches’ Rock, Weber Cañon. Illustration by Thomas Moran. Gilcrease 2526.1930

PAGE AT LEFT: An early edition of *Sunset Pass* by Zane Grey; *The Escort*, by Frederic Remington (American, 1861-1909), oil on canvas, Gilcrease 0127.2312. *The Escort* also appears on the front cover.

THIS PAGE: Masthead from the pulp western magazine *Ranch Romances*, ca. 1930s.

How the West Was Spun

THE REAL AND THE IMAGINED
WEST CONVERGE IN THE
WRITTEN WORD.



BECAUSE OF ITS BREADTH, difficulty of access, and late settlement, the American West became myth before it was reality for many Americans. As Jim Ronda writes in “West Words,” “This West had to be verbalized and set down on paper before it could be visualized. The tangled chaos of plains, mountains, deserts, and forests had to be reduced to words and text. Writing about what they saw, thought they saw, or hoped they might see, explorers composed the country and made it a landscape.”

Ronda examines one pivotal example of the power of words to affect experience — the western mission entrusted by Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1803. Jefferson’s own

thinking about the West, which he had seen only in imagination, was colored by the written accounts of earlier explorations. Combining what he knew with what he imagined and hoped for, he compiled a list of objectives for the explorers, in the form of a letter of instructions. Ronda assesses the contents of this letter to gauge the power of language to shape experience.

Thomas Jefferson and the Lewis and Clark Expedition are elements in a fascinating public story of perception, exploration, and articulation. A more private example of these phenomena is found in the literary genre called the memoir. This elastic form is adaptable to anecdote, chronological “life story,” philosophical musings, records of neutral fact, even (in the case of O.J. Simpson, for example) attempts at self exoneration. What the best have in common is an ability to shuttle back and forth between literal, quantifiable truth and the “emotional truth” that is more dreamlike and less stable over time.

Because of the twinned nature of the western experience, so apt to blend “the truth of myth” with “the truth of reality,” the memoir is a poignant form for recording lives lived in the West. It is especially so in

the hands of such gifted and truthful writers as the ones excerpted in this issue of the *Journal*: Teresa Jordan, Mary Clearman Blew, and Edith Kohl.

If a memory may sometimes have the quality of a thing imagined, as Mary Clearman Blew reminds us in “The Sow in the River,” the reverse is also true. Imagined scenes may become so deep a part of a reader’s experience that they are almost like memories of lived events. When similar characters and scenes are revisited in different (but familiar) circumstances over and over again, they become almost like people we know and moments we have lived ourselves — but tidier, perhaps, than real life. With beginnings, middles, and conclusions, and with a moral at the end. Perhaps this is the draw of modern sitcoms and weekly television dramas, and surely it was part of the immense popularity of western pulp fiction in the earlier decades of this century. The western novelist Elmer Kelton tells us about his experience as a fiction writer for the “pulp” in this issue.

All the writers in this issue of the *Journal* deal in one way or another with the written word and aspects of its relationship to both the myth and the reality of the American West. Alongside their thoughts, we showcase western paintings from the Gilcrease collection that visually extend our exploration of the relationship between narrative and perception, between memory and imagination, between dream and reality. Many of the most “literal” western paintings show a world that never was, except in the popular imagination. Like western fiction, they are peopled with legendary characters invented to summarize the ideals of the Wild West: gunfighters, saloon girls, country doctors, cowboys, “Welsh Indians.” But, like western memoirs, while they may have more in common with dreams than with reality, they are built on the emotional truth of human desire, and in this they are wholly authentic. — G. HARALSON

AUTHORS

JAMES P. RONDA is the H. G. Barnard Professor of Western American History at the University of Tulsa. His principal area of research is the history of exploration in North America. A popular lecturer and prolific writer, he has just published his seventh book, *Revealing America: Image and Imagination in the Exploration of North America*, with D. C. Heath. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Thomas Gilcrease Museum Association.

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW, a native of the plains of Montana, is the author of two collections of short stories, *Lambing Out* and *Runaway*. She is coeditor of *The Last Best Places: A Montana Anthology* and *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. She teaches at the University of Idaho.

EDITH AMMONS KOHL arrived in South Dakota with her sister Ida Mary in 1907 to prove up a claim. In 1938 she published a detailed and engaging account of her experiences as a “girl homesteader.”

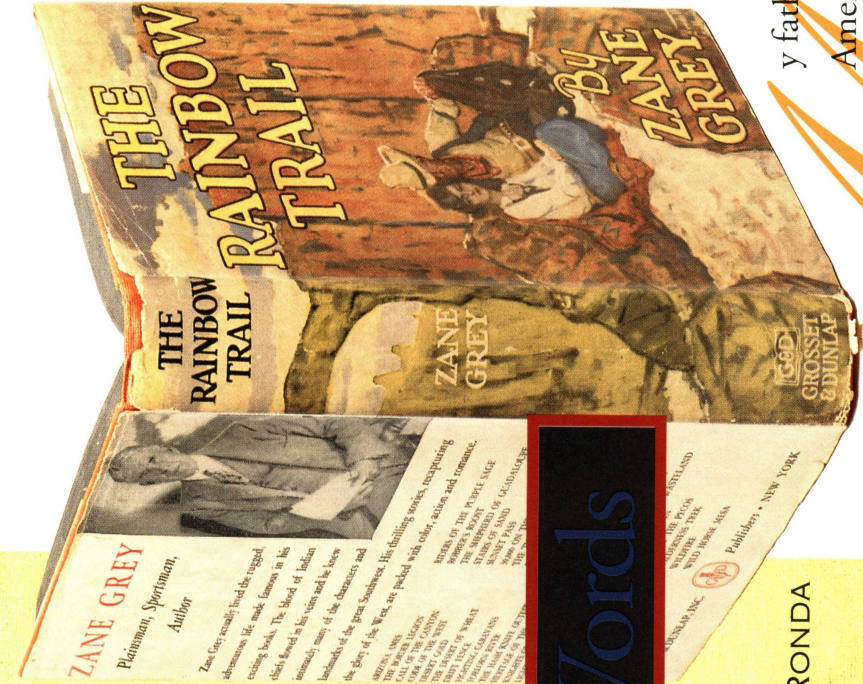
TERESA JORDAN was born and raised on a fourth-generation ranch in the Iron Mountains of southern Wyoming. She is author of *Cougars: Women of the American West* and editor of *Graining the Mare: The Poetry of Ranch Women*. She writes frequently about the West and rural culture from her home in Nevada, which she shares with her husband Hal Cannon.

ELMER KELTON, the son and grandson of working cowboys, is one of Texas’s major novelists, known for both his popular or traditional westerns and more serious literary works, all based on Texas history or contemporary life. Four of his novels have won Spur Awards from Western Writers of America and three have earned the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. A native of Crane, Texas, Kelton has a degree in journalism from the University of Texas and is a respected livestock journalist. A veteran of World War II, he began writing for pulp magazines before turning to novels.



BY JAMES P. RONDA

West Words



My father never traveled the American West. He never drove section lines in

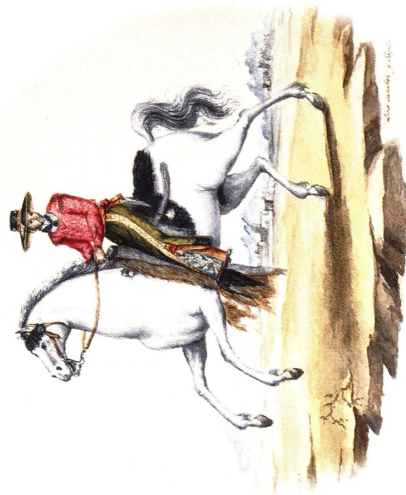
western Kansas, never walked the streets of Laredo, never raced antelope on the road between Casper and Shoshoni. But he was certain he knew that land beyond the 98th Meridian, for he had seen it. My father's conviction testifies to the enduring power of language to mold and shape belief and behavior. Words — in my father's case, the words of Zane Grey and Max Brand — fashioned a whole compelling vocabulary of images and meanings. My father knew his West because words invented it, defined it, and gave it location on a larger cultural map. In the country of the mind, my father explored his West without ever leaving the mean streets of Cicero, Illinois.

Seeing as an Act of Imagination. The experience of my father and countless others tells us something important about the subtle relationship between language, imagination, and journeys of exploration. His confident assertion that he had seen the West without ever being there is a reminder of different kinds of seeing and knowing. Here was “seeing” that went beyond retinas and optic nerves. My father’s seeing was an act of imagination and invented memories. His mind’s eye saw a landscape shaped by what he read. His western geography was the terrain of book titles — *Sunset Pass*, *The Rainbow Trail*, *Black Mesa*, and the inevitable *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

In his magnificent book *Arctic Dreams*, naturalist Barry Lopez writes that “desire causes imagination to misconstrue what it finds.” Words spark desire. Some words about the West have been about possessing its wealth. The promise was profit in gold, fur, cattle, and land. Other equally powerful words offered the rewards of empire, freedom, and adventure. The western vocabulary also included passion, violence, and work. Words that incited desire lit up the imagination. Journey makers fashioned places and expectations even before leaving home. The adventurers who traveled with Francisco Vásquez de Coronado walked the streets of the Seven Cities of Cibola long before reaching the Zuni pueblos. Explorers, travelers, painters, and writers went into the West already prepared to see and find their heart’s desire. They wrote the country and read its promise before marching it. Before there were graphic images of the West for European audiences there were words — words describing the West as both terrain and state of mind.

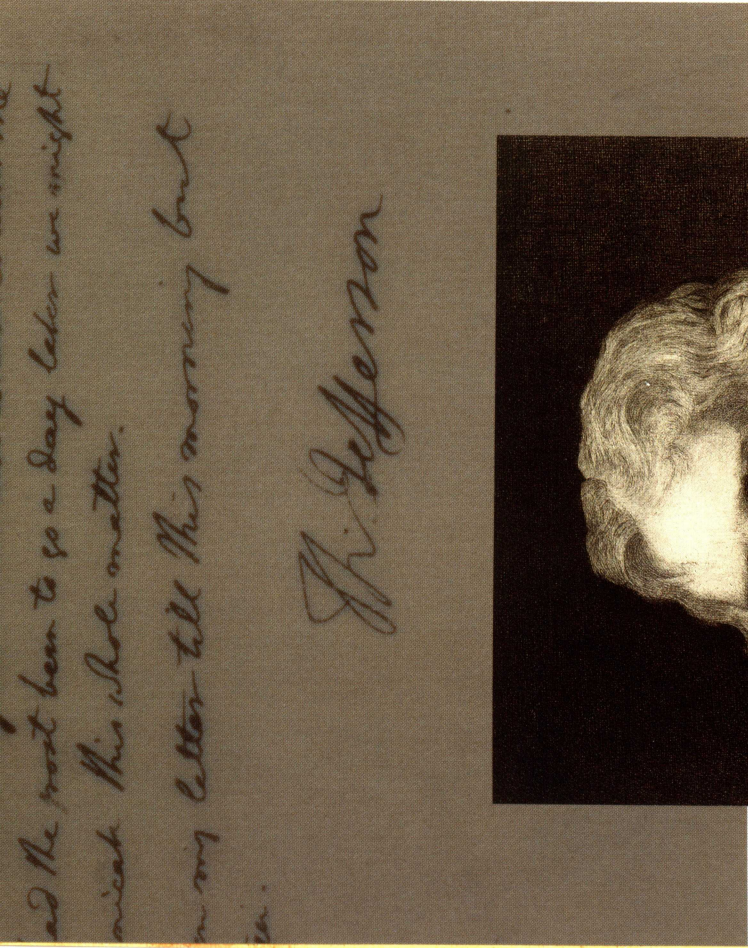
Those words — and the powerful, seductive ideas expressed in them and by them and through them — came from the imaginations and experiences of entrepreneurs and adventurers, promoters and explorers. What they wrote gave shape and substance to a West both imagined and real. Explorers and their patrons invented the West, or rather, they invented the meanings for one among many possible Wests. They built my father’s western geography. To borrow a phrase from William Goetzmann, this “West of the imagination” was a wonderland of the fantastic and the marvelous. Here the exotic was commonplace and the erotic seemed to beckon with eager embrace. The words fashioned a timeless place where the dead hand of the past held no sway, where life could begin afresh at the dawn of creation. This West wore brighter colors, breathed purer air, and danced along virtue’s path. Whether the dreams were of fur or gold, wheat or oil, the West seemed an Eden come back to earth. Nature seemed larger and more immediate. Elemental forces fought on a vast

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Charro Mexicano.

LINO SANCHEZ Y TAPIA (? - 1838)
Charro Mexicano (plate XXXI)
watercolor on paper, ca. 1828
GILCREASE, 4016.336



scale to create signs in rock and water — signs of wonder, awe, and majesty.

This West had to be verbalized and set down on paper before it could be visualized. The tangled chaos of plains, mountains, deserts, and forests had to be reduced to words and text. Writing about what they saw, thought they saw, or hoped they might see, explorers composed the country and made it a landscape. As Willa Cather wrote in *O Pioneers!*, the West was “nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.” In letters, journals, and official reports, explorers gave readers a set of expectations,

prefabricated experiences about the West. Explorers and travelers ignored Native American stories about the western drama and wrote new ones that placed themselves at center stage. Those vocabularies of discovery set the context, defined the limits before any artist put brush to canvas. The colors of the mental palette were mixed in a swirl of explorers’ words and texts. Artists saw the West first not as image but as word. To appreciate the images we must begin with the words.

Some of the earliest and most powerful words in English about the West came from Thomas Jefferson and his traveling captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The Lewis and Clark expedition was Jefferson’s Corps of Discovery, the way for him to

We should begin where Lewis and Clark began, not in St. Louis, but in the spacious mind of the third president of the United States. Like all explorers, Lewis and Clark carried with them a program, a design. It was Jefferson’s design, one he fashioned by blending his own thoughts with accounts of voyages made by the great English explorers.

explore the West from Monticello. While John C. Frémont and other government explorers were more widely read in the 19th century, it was Jefferson and his Corps of Discovery who set the aesthetic pattern — a pattern that Lewis once called “scenes of visionary enchantment.”

We should begin where Lewis and Clark began, not in St. Louis, but in the spacious mind of the third president of the United States. Like all explorers, Lewis and Clark carried with them a program, a design. It was Jefferson’s design, one he fashioned by blending his own thoughts with accounts of voyages made by the great English explorers, James Cook, George Vancouver, and Alexander Mackenzie. Jefferson’s captains saw the West through his eyes and by his design. And their words left a legacy of seeing to generations of artists, writers, and image makers.

JACQUES REICH (1852-1923)
AMERICAN, BORN HUNGARY
Thomas Jefferson
etching on paper
GILCREASE, 1527.128

Detail, letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Fleming written July 1, 1776

GILCREASE, 3826.71
EMMANUEL LEUTZE (1816-1868)
Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0126.1615



*To Captain Meriwether
Lewis esq. Capt. of the
1st regimt. of Infantry of
the U.S. of A.*

Your situation as Secretary of the President of the U.S. has made you acquainted with the objects of my confidential message of Jan. 18, 1803 to the legislature; you have seen the act they passed, which tho' expressed in general terms, was meant to sanction those objects and you are appointed to carry them into execution.

Instruments for ascertaining, by celestial observations, the geography of the country through which you will pass, have been already provided. Light articles for barter and presents among the Indians, arms for your attendants, say for from 10. to 12. men, boats, tents & other travelling apparatus, with ammunition, medicine, surgical instruments and provisions you will have prepared with such aids as the Secretary at War can yield in his department ...

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river & such principal stream of it, as, by it's course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, ... may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.

Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take observations of latitude & longitude, at all remarkable points on the river & especially at the mouths of rivers, at rapids, at islands, & other

places and objects distinguished by such natural marks & characters of a durable kind, as they may with certainty be recognised hereafter. ...

Two copies of your notes or as many more as leisure will admit, should be made & confided to the care of the most trusty individuals of your attendants.

In all your
intercourse with the natives,
treat them in the most friendly
& conciliatory manner which
their own conduct will admit
... Carry with you some matter
of the kinepox; inform those of
them with whom you may be,
of it's efficacy as a preservative
from the smallpox; & instruct
& encourage them in the use of
it. This may be especially done
wherever you may winter. . . .

Should you find it safe to return by the way you go, after sending two of your party round by sea, or with your whole party, if no conveyance by sea can be found, do so; making such observations on your return, as may serve to supply, correct or confirm those made on your outward journey.

On re-entering the U.S. and reaching a place of safety, discharge any of your attendants who may desire & deserve it, procuring for them immediate payment of all arrears of pay & cloathing ... and repair yourself with your papers to the seat of government to which I have only to add my sincere prayer for your safe return.

...
Given under my
hand at the city of Washington
...

TH: J. PR. U.S. OF A.

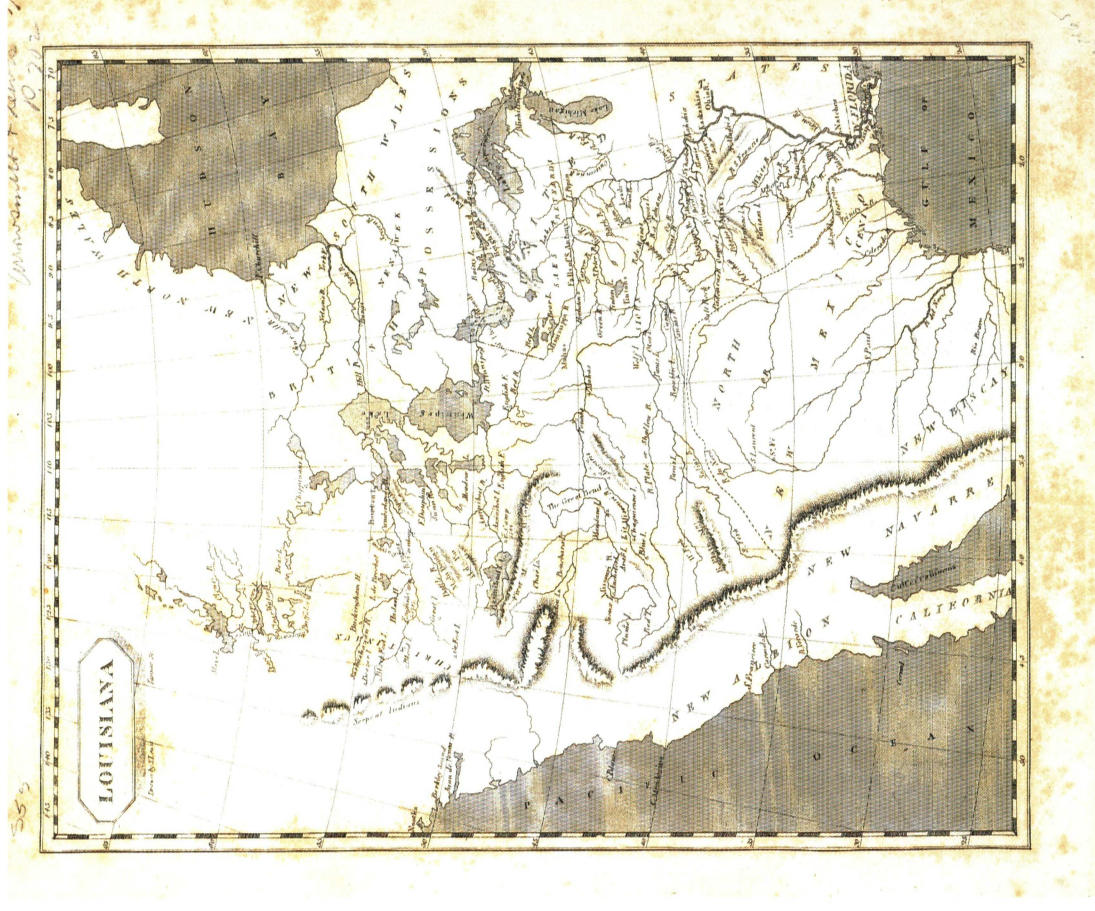
Jefferson's Instructions to Lewis & Clark. There is no more familiar document in western exploration history than the instructions Jefferson drafted for Meriwether Lewis in the early summer of 1803. We tend to think about those words as guidelines for the explorers, a kind of rough script for the expedition's great western movie. It was that, but something more as well. The instructions give us clues toward deciphering Jefferson's own secret code of the West. What he thought his captains would see up the Missouri, across the mountains, and down the Columbia can help us appreciate the enduring power of words and the West.

Reading the instructions as a commentary on Jefferson's mind and imagination tells us some fascinating and compelling things. First, the president assumed that the West was already a battlefield, an arena where the European imperial powers would fight for control of the West and the destiny of all North America. Like the 19th-century history painters

Emanuel Leutze, Carl Wimar, and George Caleb Bingham, Jefferson imagined the West as a canvas filled with armed men locked in mortal combat. Jefferson often thought about the West as a garden, but he knew that Eden had more than its share of violence. We should not be surprised by this. After all, the American continent had been both battleground and prize since the 1490s. And native people struggled against each other long before the bearded strangers arrived to thicken the plot. Jefferson was determined to make the American republic an imperial contender in the war for the West.

The word “empire” does not appear in Jefferson’s instructions to Lewis. But there is a word, always connected in the 18th century to empire, that appears at least four times in crucial places. The word is “commerce,” broadly defined as nearly all productive, profitable human activity. Whatever judgment he was making at the time, Jefferson nearly always connected commerce to ideas about empire and struggle. Jefferson and other visionaries knew that business enterprise and national empires marched together. When the

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SAMUEL LEWIS
Map of Louisiana, 1804
GILCREASE, 3926.257

violence seemed an inescapable western word.

Jefferson's second assumption about the West settled on the land, its appearance and its promise. Maps of the West before Lewis and Clark usually portrayed an uncluttered, nearly empty region. While Jefferson did not expect the kind of landscape complexity we know in the West today, neither did he think it was a simple, almost vacant place. Mountains interested him. His house, built on a mountain, was named



Monticello. He expected mountains in the West, some volcanic and perhaps even one of salt. But it was rivers that fascinated the Virginian, both aesthetically and for their commercial and imperial value. He expected Lewis and Clark to find a land filled with rivers. In fact, he imagined a kind of republic of rivers. Their names run through the instructions like a shining thread — Missouri, Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, and the ghost Rio Bravo.

Jefferson once wrote that “no occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth.” This devoted gardener put new plants and animals on the Lewis and Clark priority list. The president expected that his explorers would find an abundance of what he called “productions animal and vegetable.” One of the most powerful words in Jefferson’s vocabulary was “garden,” and when he applied it to the West it meant both a physical description and a spiritual promise. The West was the Garden of the World. But it is important to remember, especially when we look at works by natural history painters like Titian Peale, Carl

JOHN MIX STANLEY (1814-1872)
Scouts in the Tetons
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0126.1143

FACING PAGE

ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830-1902)
AMERICAN, BORN GERMANY
Multnomah Falls
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0126.2354

*Jefferson . . . imagined a kind of
republic of rivers.*

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL

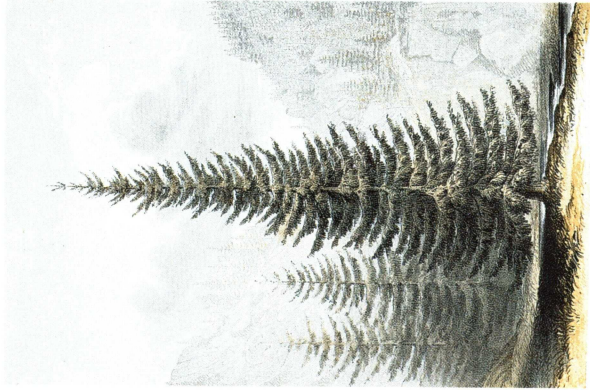
WORDS IN JEFFERSON'S VOCABULARY

WAS "GARDEN," AND WHEN HE

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BOTH A PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION AND

A SPIRITUAL PROMISE.



PACIFIC RAILROAD SURVEYS
(PUBLISHED IN 1857)

Abies Douglass II

(vol. 6, following page 54)

Illustration by J. Young

GILCREASE, 2526.3574

Bodmer, and the many scientific illustrators who worked for the various federal surveys in the West, that Jefferson expected particular kinds of plants and animals in his western garden. The science Jefferson loved most was natural history. Botany and zoology had direct human applications. Like his contemporaries in England's Royal Society and the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson valued useful knowledge. That meant scientific exploration not for its own sake but for practical, economic rewards. Utility was the measure of all things. Today we are delighted by looking at the lovely plant specimens from the Lewis and Clark expedition, some so fresh they seem to have been cut yesterday. But we should recall that what Jefferson prized most were samples of corn and tobacco. The best plants in his Garden of the West were to feed and clothe human beings.

Although Jefferson never journeyed west beyond the Blue Ridge mountains, he expected the West to be a land of marvels. While many of the fantastic notions about the West were beginning to fade at the end of the 18th century, the president was not immune from some of the most compelling western folklore or "fakelore".

Thomas Jefferson's Land of Western Wonders — a theme park of the mind — still held herds of llamas and packs of mastodons in a landscape of volcanic towers and salt mountains. And of course there were blond-haired, blue-eyed Welsh Indians to round out an exotic land. But Jefferson's belief in a western wonderland went deeper than fantastic scenery, bizarre animals,

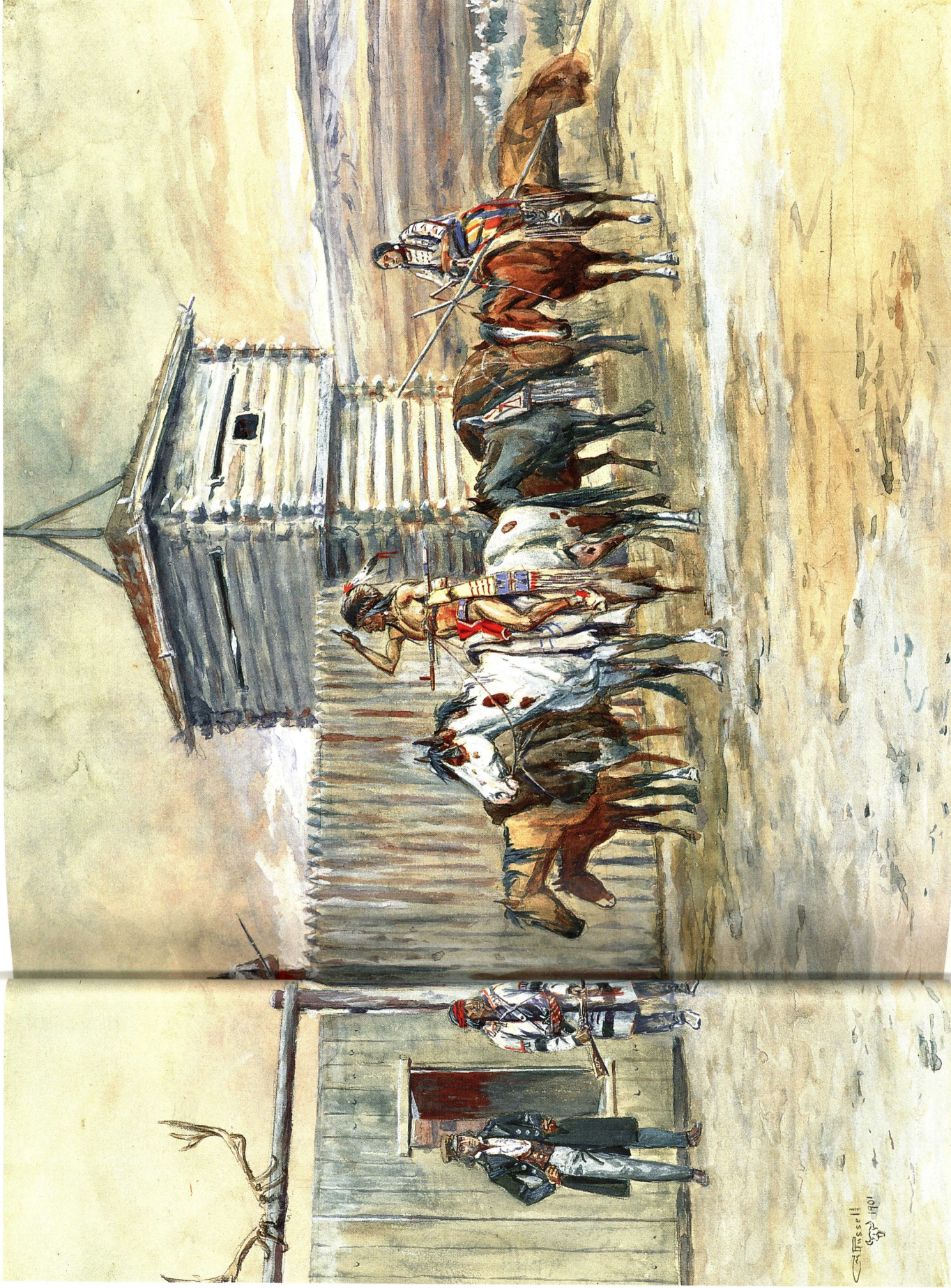
and mysterious natives. Jefferson believed in his very soul that the West offered the promise of renewal, of starting again in a new place. Like so many in his time, Jefferson had a passionate belief in the beneficial consequences of owning land. Farmers were the chosen people of God, so he said, and the lands beyond the Mississippi were a garden stretching to the Pacific horizon. The West could keep Americans down on the farm,

CHARLES M. RUSSELL (1864-1926)

Robe Traders at Fort Benton

watercolor on paper, 1901

GILCREASE, 0237.1323



forever young, forever virtuous. Here, so the compelling words said, the restless and the dissatisfied could erase the troubled past and begin life afresh. Writers from Jefferson and James Fenimore Cooper to Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour imagined a western paradise where Americans could repeal history and find the best in themselves. It was as if motion meant salvation and the death of the past. The lure of the road and the promise of the West became words and text in countless novels, poems, essays, and films.

Jefferson's invented West came pre-packaged and with postage due for later generations. Much of what Jefferson gave Lewis and Clark was fantasy, fairly dangerous fantasy at that. Gardens became dust bowls and violence too often overwhelmed the peaceable kingdom. But his final expectation was anything but illusory. Nearly half of Jefferson's instructions for Lewis dealt with native people, either as objects for scientific study or as important peoples and tribes to be reckoned with as allies or enemies. Jefferson acknowledged but did not fully understand one of the western fundamentals — that the country was already home to people who might not recognize him as a great father. Lewis and Clark had many Indian missions, everything from diplomacy to ethnography. In his instructions Jefferson recognized that native people played many roles in their own lives. They were builders, hunters, farmers, artisans, warriors, parents, relatives, and healers. But in time the richness of those roles fell away and too many writers found too many words to describe only savage warriors and drudge-like native women.

"Landscapes of Expectation." A century ago the eager press agents of the Northern Pacific Railway published a glorious series of pamphlets extolling the promise of the West. Thomas Moran appeared there as did other painters now less well known. Thomas Jefferson and my father would have loved to page through these wonderland guides. The guides would have convinced both armchair travelers of what they already believed — that the West was a treasure chest bursting with every fantasy known to the super-heated eastern imagination. The solid men of the western railroads were not about to fill their pages with llamas, mammoths, and Welsh Indians but the impulse was the same. In Jefferson's West, the press agent's West, the line between fantasy and reality was hard to find and easy to transgress. The Lewis and Clark journals, like reports from other explorers, should have been a stiff dose of reality. There were no llamas, the ground shook with buffalo, not mastodons, and the Welsh Indians proved as elusive as ever. But illusion dies hard and the captains could no more escape their dreams than could

The Lewis and Clark journals, like reports from other explorers, should have been a stiff dose of reality. There were no llamas, the ground shook with buffalo, not mastodons, and the Welsh Indians proved as elusive as ever.

Jefferson and my father. The words of the president and his Corps of Discovery gave writers and artists the boundaries of what historian William Cronon calls "landscapes of expectation." Explorers discovered lands and then employed words to invent futures. The words defined the images, preceded them, and then explained them.

On a clear, bright day in early June 1805, Meriwether Lewis stood beside the Great Falls of the Missouri, the first of five falls at what is now Great Falls, Montana. It was, he wrote, "the grandest sight I ever beheld." The falls were "truly magnificent and a sublimely grand object." Drawn to the water's thunder and spray, Lewis quickly fell into a reverie of "pleasure and astonishment." For a time he struggled to define the falls in measures and dimensions, feet and yards. Words like "beauty," "majesty," and "grand" bumped uneasily against precise counts of distance and drop. But the vocabularies of science and the sublime failed. The falls begged the imagination. In a burst of impatience so typical of Lewis, he confessed that he wished for the drawing pencil of Salvador Rosa, the 17th-century Italian landscape painter, or the pen of the Scottish Romantic poet James Thompson. Lewis said he drafted a hasty sketch of the falls but it has not survived. What has endured are the words — words that continue to mold and shape the way we see the falls and the river. The day after Lewis saw the Great Falls he went up the Missouri to



LOUIS NICOLAS (1634 - ?)
Codex Canadensis (page 27)

pen and ink on paper
GILCREASE, 4726.7

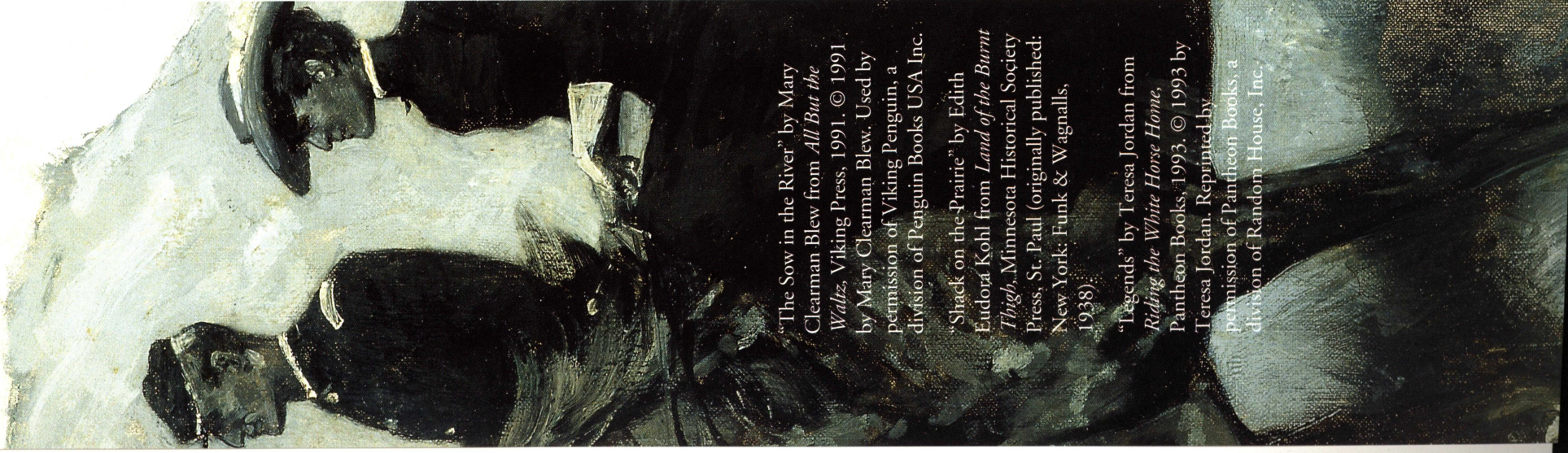


Black Eagle Falls. There he saw something so astounding as to seem contrived. In the middle of the river, on the lip of the falls, was an island. On the island a twisted cottonwood tree supported an eagle's nest. Here was the domestic in the midst of the wild.

Some 128 years after Lewis stood transfixed by the eagle, the falls, and the river, artist and Great Falls resident Olaf Seltzer painted the scene. Seltzer knew the view from Black Eagle Falls firsthand. But having read Lewis's words, he composed the scene as the explorer described it. The painting is now in the permanent collection at Gilcrease. Shaped not by field experience but by a reading journey into the words and sentences of Lewis's journal, it is a vibrant visual example of the complex relationship between dreams and expectations, words and images — a relationship whose exploration can enrich and inform our pleasure in both written works and visual treasures preserved at the Gilcrease Museum. ◀

Zane Grey novels illustrated are from the Special Collections of the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

OLAF C. SELTZER (1877-1957)
Captain Lewis at the Black Eagle
Falls of the Missouri River —
June 13, 1805
 oil on canvas
 GILCREASE, 0137.753



“The Sow in the River” by Mary Clearman Blew from *All But the Waltz*, Viking Press, 1991. © 1991 by Mary Clearman Blew. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

“Shack on the Prairie” by Edith Eudora Kohl from *Land of the Burnt Thigh*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul (originally published: New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1938).

“Legends” by Teresa Jordan from *Riding the White Horse Home*, Pantheon Books, 1993. © 1993 by Teresa Jordan. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

The Western Memoir

As we near the end of the century and the millennium, stock-taking occurs in many areas and on many levels. One of the most pleasurable for readers of American literature, and western literature in particular, takes the form of work by a new generation of memoir writers, many of them women. In prose as tough as it is sentimental, they bring clear-sighted intelligence to a summing-up of western family life in the 20th century. As they re-examine their memories and ancestral stories, childhood dreams and family legends, these writers are also preserving the flavor of a unique era in our collective history.

Two contemporary memoirs extend and reinvent the tradition of western storytelling. Mary Clearman Blew’s “The Sow in the River,” makes evident the “bone-honest and enduring” quality of her memoir of five generations in the life of a ranching family in Fergus County, Montana. Teresa Jordan’s “Legends” is a powerful and evocative snapshot from her “Western Family Album” entitled *Riding the White Horse Home*.

Land of the Burnt Thigh, first published in 1938, is one of the best of the accounts of single women who homesteaded the West at the turn of the last century. Edith Kohl tells how she and her sister Ida Mary, both in their twenties, arrived in central South Dakota in 1907 to try homesteading near the “Land of the Burnt Thigh” — the lower Brule Indian Reservation. Living in a tiny tarpaper shack on 160 waterless acres for eight months, they successfully “proved up their claim.” They also observed two great land rushes, founded their own newspaper, opened a post office and general store, and taught school. “A Shack on the Prairie” tells the story of their arrival at the claim.



The Sow in the River

M A R Y C L E A R M A N B L E W

I N T H E S A G E B R U S H to the north of the mountains in central Montana, where the Judith River deepens its channel and threads a slow, treacherous current between the cutbanks, a cottonwood log house still stands. It is in sight of the highway, about a mile downriver on a gravel road. From where I have turned off and stopped my car on the sunlit shoulder of the highway, I can see the house, a distant and solitary dark interruption of the sagebrush. I can even see the lone box elder tree, a dusty green shade over what used to be the yard.

I know from experience that if I were to keep driving over the cattle guard and follow the gravel road through the sage and alkali to the log house, I would find the windows gone and the door sagging and the floor rotting away. But from here the house looks hardly changed from the summer of my earliest memories, the summer before I was three, when I lived in that log house on the lower Judith with my mother and father and grandmother and my grandmother’s boyfriend, Bill.

My memories seem to me as treacherous as the river. Is it possible, sitting here on this dry shoulder of a secondary highway in the middle of Montana where the brittle weeds of August scratch at the sides of the car, watching the narrow blue Judith take its time to thread and wind through the bluffs on its way to a distant northern blur, to believe in anything but today? The past eases away with the current. I cannot watch a single drop of water out of sight. How can I trust memory, which slips and wobbles and grinds its erratic furrows like a bald-tired truck fighting for traction on a wet gumbo road?

Light flickers. A kerosene lamp in the middle of the table has driven the shadows back into the corners of the kitchen. Faces and hands emerge in a circle. Bill has brought apples from the box in the dark closet. The coil of peel follows his pocket-knife. I bite into the piece of quartered apple he hands me, I hear its snap, taste the juice. The shadows hold threats: mice and the shape of nameless things. But in the circle around the lamp, in the certainty of apples, I am safe.

ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830-1902)

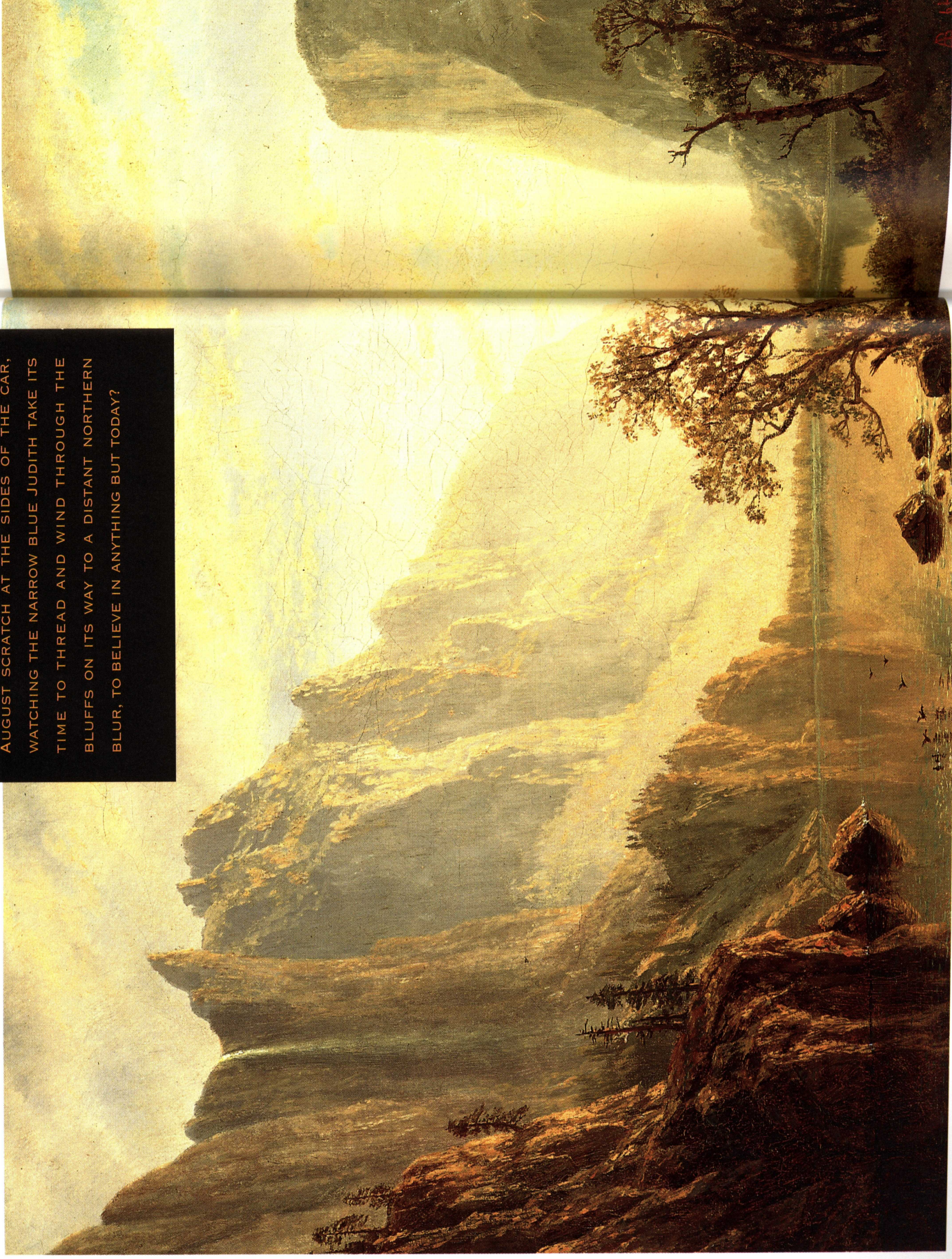
AMERICAN, BORN GERMANY

Mountain Scene and River

oil on canvas

GILCREASE, 0126.1179

MY MEMORIES SEEM TO ME AS TREACHEROUS AS THE RIVER. IS IT POSSIBLE, SITTING HERE ON THIS DRY SHOULDER OF A SECONDARY HIGHWAY IN THE MIDDLE OF MONTANA WHERE THE BRITTLE WEEDS OF AUGUST SCRATCH AT THE SIDES OF THE CAR, WATCHING THE NARROW BLUE JUDITH TAKE ITS TIME TO THREAD AND WIND THROUGH THE BLUFFS ON ITS WAY TO A DISTANT NORTHERN BLUR, TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING BUT TODAY?



The last of the kerosene tilts and glitters around the wick. I cower behind Grammy on the stairs, but she boldly walks into the shadows, which reel and retreat from her and her lamp. In her bedroom the window reflects large pale her and timorous me. She undresses herself, undresses me;

she piles my pants and stockings on the chair with her dress and corset. After she uses

it, her pot is warm for me. Her bed is cold, then warm. I burrow against her back and smell the smoke from the wick she has pinched out. Bill blows his nose from his bedroom on the other side of the landing. Beyond the eaves the shapeless creatures of sound, owls and coyotes, have taken the night. But I am here, safe in the center.

I am the center again on the day we look for Bill's pigs. I am sitting between him and Grammy in the cab of the old Ford truck while the rain sheets on the windshield. Bill found the pigpen gate open when he went to feed the pigs this morning, their pen empty, and

now they are nowhere to be found. He has driven and driven through the sagebrush and around the gulches, peering out through the endless gray rain as the truck spins and growls on the gumbo in low gear. But no pigs. He and Grammy do not speak. The cab is cold, but I am bundled well between them with my feet on the clammy assortment of tools and nails and chains on the floorboards and my nose just dashboard level, and I am at home with the smell of wet wool and metal and the feel of a broken spring in the seat.

But now Bill tramps on the brakes, and he and Grammy and I gaze through the streaming windshield at the river. The Judith has risen up its cutbanks, and its angry gray current races the rain. I have never seen such a Judith, such a tumult of water. But what transfixes me and Grammy and Bill behind our teeming glass is not the ruthless condition of the river — no, for on a bare ait midcurrent, completely surrounded and only inches above that muddy river, huddle the pigs.

The flat top of the ait is so small that the old sow takes up most of it by herself. The river divides and rushes around her, rising, practically at her hooves.

Surrounding her, trying to crawl under her, snorting in apprehension at the water, are her little pigs. Watching spellbound from the cab of the truck, I can feel their small terrified rumps burrowing against her sides, drawing warmth from her center even as more dirt crumbles under their hooves. My surge of

understanding arcs across the current, and my flesh shrivels in the icy sheets of rain. Like the pigs I cringe at the roar of the river, although behind the insulated walls of the cab I can hear and feel nothing. I am in my center and they are in theirs. The current separates us irrevocably, and suddenly I understand that my center is as precarious as theirs, that the chill metal cab of the old truck is almost as fragile as their ring of crumbling sod.

And then the scene darkens and I see no more.

For years I would watch for the ait. When I was five my family moved, but I learned to snatch a glimpse whenever we drove past our old turnoff on the road from Lewistown to Denton. The ait was in plain view, just a hundred yards downriver from the highway, as it is today. Ait was a fancy word I learned afterward. It was a fifteen-foot-high steep-sided, flat-topped pinnacle of dirt left standing in the bed of the river after years of wind and water erosion. And I never caught sight of it without the same small thrill of memory: that's where the pigs were.

One day I said it out loud. I was grown by then. "That's where the pigs were."

My father was driving. We would have crossed the Judith River bridge, and I would have turned my head to keep sight of the ait and the lazy blue threads of water around the sandbars.

My father said, "What pigs?"

"The old sow and her pigs," I said, surprised.

"The time the river flooded. I remember how the water rose right up to their feet."

My father said, "The Judith never got that high, and there never was any pigs up there."

"Yes there were! I remember!" I could see the little pigs as clearly as I could see my father, and I could remember exactly how my own skin had shriveled as they cringed back from the water and butted the sow for cold comfort.

My father shook his head. "How did you think pigs would get up there?" he asked.

Of course they couldn't.

His logic settled on me like an awakening in ordinary daylight. Of course a sow could not lead nine or ten suckling pigs up those sheer fifteen-foot crumbling dirt sides, even for fear of their lives. And why, after all, would pigs even try to scramble to the top of such a precarious perch when they could escape a cloudburst by following any one of the cattle trails or deer trails that webbed the cutbanks on both sides of the river?

Had there been a cloudburst at all? Had there been pigs?

No, my father repeated. The Judith had never flooded anywhere near that high in our time. Bill Hafer had always raised a few pigs when we lived down there on the river, but he kept them penned up. No.

Today I lean on the open window of my car and yawn and listen to the sounds of late summer. The snapping of grasshoppers. Another car approaching on the highway, roaring past my shoulder of the road, then fading away until I can hear the faint scratches of some small hidden creature in the weeds. I am bone-deep in landscape. In this dome of sky and river and undeflected sunlight, in this illusion of timelessness, I can almost feel my body, blood, and breath in the broken line of the bluffs and the pervasive scent of ripening sweet clover and dust, almost feel the sagging fence line of ancient cedar posts stapled across my vitals.

The only shade in sight is across the river where box elders lean over a low white frame house with a big modern house trailer parked behind it.

Downstream, far away, a man works along a ditch. I think he might be the husband of a second cousin of mine who still lives on her old family place. My cousins wouldn't know me if they stopped and asked me what I was doing here.

Across the highway, a trace of a road leads through a barbed-wire gate and sharply up the bluff. It is the old cutoff to Danvers, a town that has dried up and blown away. I have heard that the cutoff has washed out, further up the river, but down here it still holds a little bleached gravel. Almost



ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830-1902)
AMERICAN, BORN GERMANY
On the Platte River, Nebraska
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0126.14

as though my father might turn off in his battered truck at fifteen miles an hour, careful of his bald wartime tires, while I lie on the seat with my head on his thigh and take my nap. Almost as though at the end of that road will be the two grain elevators pointing sharply out of the hazy

olives and others of the grass into the rolling cumulus, and two or three graveled streets with traffic moving past the pool hall and post office and dug-out store where, when I wake from my nap and scramble down from the high seat of the truck, Old Man Longin will be waiting behind his single glass display case with my precious wartime candy bar.

Yes, that little girl was me, I guess. A three-year-old standing on the unswept board floor, looking up at rows of canned goods on shelves that were nailed against the logs in the 1880s, when Montana was still a territory. The dust smelled the same to her as it does to me now.

Across the river, that low white frame house where my cousin still lives is the old Sample place. Ninety years ago a man named Sample fell in love with a woman named Carrie. Further up the bottom — you can't see it from here because of the cottonwoods — stands Carrie's deserted house in what used to be a fenced yard. Forty years ago Carrie's house was full of three generations of her family, and the yard was full of cousins at play. Sixty years ago the young man who would be my father rode on horseback down that long hill to Carrie's house, and Sample said to Carrie, *Did your brother Albert ever have a son? From the way the kid sits his horse, he must be your brother's son.*

Or so the story goes. Sample was murdered. Carried died in her sleep. My father died of exposure.

The Judith winds toward its mouth. Its current seems hardly to move. Seeing it in August, so blue and

IN 1805 THE EXPLORERS LEWIS AND CLARK, PAUSING IN THEIR QUEST FOR THE PACIFIC, SAW THE MOUNTAINS AND THE PRAIRIES OF CENTRAL MONTANA AND THE WILD GAME BEYOND RECKONING. THEY ALSO NOTED THIS RIVER, WHICH THEY NAMED AFTER A GIRL.

unhurried, it is difficult to believe how many drownings or near drownings the Judith has counted over the years. To a stranger it surely must look insignificant, hardly worth calling a river.

In 1805 the explorers Lewis and Clark, pausing in their quest for the Pacific, saw the mountains and the prairies of central Montana and the wild game beyond reckoning.

They also noted this river, which they named after a girl. Lewis and Clark were the first white recorders of this place. In recording it, they altered it. However indifferent to the historical record, those who see this river and hear its name, Judith, see it in a slightly different way because Lewis and Clark saw it and wrote about it.

In naming the river, Lewis Clark claimed it for a system of governance that required a wrenching of the fundamental connections between landscape and its inhabitants. This particular drab sagebrush pocket of the West was never, perhaps, holy ground. None of the

landmarks here is invested with the significance of the sacred buttes to the north. For the Indian tribes that hunted here, central Montana must have been commonplace, a familiar stretch of their lives, a place to ride and breathe and be alive.

But even this drab pocket is now a part of the history of the West, which, through a hundred and fifty years of white settlement and economic development, of rapid depletion of water and coal and



THOMAS MORAN (1837-1926)
AMERICAN, BORN ENGLAND
Adam's Creek
watercolor on paper, 1855
GILCREASE, 0226.799

timber and topsoil, of dependence upon military escalation and federal subsidies, has been a history of the transformation of landscape from a place to be alive in into a place to own.

This is a transformation that breaks connections, that holds little in common. My deepest associations with this sunlit river are private. Without a connection between outer and inner landscape, I cannot tell my father what I saw.

“There never was a sow in the river,” he said, embarrassed at my notion. And yet I know there was a sow in the river.

All who come and go bring along their own context, leave their mark, however faint. If the driver glanced out the window of that car that just roared past, what did he see? Tidy irrigated alfalfa fields, a small green respite from the dryland miles? That foreshortened man who works along the ditch, does he straighten his back from his labors and see his debts spread out in irrigation pipes and electric pumps?

It occurs to me that I dreamed the sow in the river at a time when I was too young to sort out dreams from daylight reality or to question why they should be sorted out and dismissed. As I think about it, the episode does contain some of the characteristics of a dream. That futile, endless, convoluted search in the rain, for example. The absence of sound in the cab of

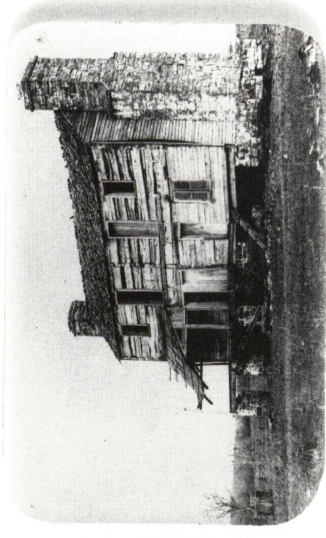
the truck, and the paralysis of the onlookers on the brink of that churning current. For now that I know she never existed outside my imagination, I think I do recognize that sow on her slippery pinnacle.

Memory lights upon a dream as readily as an external event, upon a set of rusty irrigation pipes and a historian’s carefully detailed context through which she recalls the collective memory of the past. As memory saves, discards, retrieves, fails to retrieve, its logic may well be analogous to the river’s inexorable search for the lowest ground. The trivial and the profound roll like leaves to the surface. Every ripple is suspect.

Today the Judith River spreads out in the full sunlight of August, oblivious of me and my precious associations, indifferent to the emotional context I have framed it with. My memory seems less a record of landscape and event than a superimposition upon what otherwise would continue to flow, leaf out, or crumble according to its lot. What I remember is far less trustworthy than the story I tell about it. The possibility for connection lies in story.

Whether or not I dreamed her, the sow in the river is my story. She is what I have saved, up there on her pinnacle where the river roils. †

MEMORY LIGHTS UPON A DREAM AS READILY AS AN EXTERNAL EVENT, UPON A SET OF RUSTY IRRIGATION PIPES AND A HISTORIAN’S CAREFULLY DETAILED CONTEXT THROUGH WHICH SHE RECALLS THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE PAST. AS MEMORY SAVES, DISCARDS, RETRIEVES, FAILS TO RETRIEVE, ITS LOGIC MAY WELL BE ANALOGOUS TO THE RIVER’S INEXORABLE SEARCH FOR THE LOWEST GROUND. THE TRIVIAL AND THE PROFOUND ROLL LIKE LEAVES TO THE SURFACE. EVERY RIPPLE IS SUSPECT.



A Shack on the Prairie

EDITHEUDORA KOHL

AT SUNSET we came up out of the draw to the crest of the ridge. Perched on the high seat of the old spring wagon, we looked into a desolated land which reached to the horizon on every side. Prairie which had lain untouched since the Creation save for buffalo and roving bands of Indians, its brown grass scorched and crackling from the sun. No trees to break the endless monotony or to provide a moment’s respite from the sun.

The driver, sitting stooped over on the front seat, half asleep, straightened up and looked around, sizing up the vacant prairie.

“Well,” he announced, “I reckon this might be it.” But this couldn’t be it. There was nothing but space, and sun-baked plains, and the sun blazing down on our heads. My sister pulled out the filing papers, looking for the description the United States Land Office had given her: Section 18, Range 77W — about thirty miles from Pierre, South Dakota.

“Three miles from the buffalo waller,” our driver

said, mumbling to himself, ignoring the official location and looking back as though measuring the distance with his eye. “Yeah, right in here—somewhere.”

“But,” faltered Ida Mary, “there was to be a house—”

“Thar she is!” he announced, pointing his long whip in the direction of the setting sun. “See that shack over yonder?”

Whipping up the tired team with a flick of the rawhide, he angled off across the trackless prairie. One panic-stricken look at the black, tar-papered shack, standing alone in that barren expanse, and the last spark of our dwindling enthusiasm for homesteading was snuffed out. The house, which had seemed such an extraordinary stroke of luck when we had heard of it, looked like a large but none too substantial packing-box tossed haphazardly on the prairie which crept in at its very door.

The driver stopped the team in front of the shack, threw the lines to the ground, stretched his long, lank



“BUT,” FALTERED IDA MARY, “THERE WAS TO BE A HOUSE—”

“THAR SHE ISI!” HE ANNOUNCED, POINTING HIS LONG WHIP IN THE DIRECTION OF THE SETTING SUN. “SEE THAT SHACK OVER YONDER?”

frame over the wheel and began to unload the baggage. He pushed open the unbolted door with the grass grown up to the very sill, and set the boxes and trunk inside. Grass. Dry, yellow grass cracking under his feet.

“Here, why don’t you get out?” he said sharply. “It’s sundown and a long trip back to town.”

Automatically we obeyed. As Ida Mary paid him the \$20 fee, he stood there for a moment sizing us up. Homesteaders were all in his day’s work. They came. Some stayed to prove up the land. Some didn’t. We wouldn’t.

“Don’t ’pear to me like you gals are big enough to homestead.” He took his own filled water jug from the wagon and set it down at the door, thus expressing his compassion. Then, as unconcerned as a taxi driver leaving his passengers at a city door, he drove away, leaving us alone.

Ida Mary and I fought down the impulse to run after him, implore

him to take us back with him, not to leave us alone with the prairie and the night, with nothing but the packing-box for shelter. I think we were too overwhelmed by the magnitude of our disaster even to ask for help.

We stared after him until the sudden evening chill which comes with the dusk of the frontier roused us to action.

Hesitantly we stepped over the low sill of the little shack, feeling like intruders. Ida Mary, who had been so proud of finding a claim with a house already built, stared at it without a word, her round, young face shadowed by the brim of her straw hat drawn and tired.

It was a typical homestead shack, about 10 x 12 feet, containing only one room, and built of rough, foot-wide boards, with a small cellar window on either side of the room. Like the walls, the door was of wide boards. The whole house was covered on the outside with tar paper. It had obviously been put together with small concern for the fine points of carpentry and none whatever for appearance. It looked as though the first wind would pick it up and send it flying through the air.

It was as unprepossessing within as it was outside. In one corner a homemade bunk was fastened to the wall, with ropes crisscrossed and run through holes in the 2 x 4 inch pieces of lumber which formed the bed, to take the place of springs. In another corner, a rusty, two-hole oil stove stood on a dry goods box; above it another box with a shelf in it for a cupboard. Two rickety, homemade chairs completed the furnishings.

We tried to tell ourselves that we were lucky; shacks were not provided for homesteaders, they had to build their own — but Ida Mary had succeeded in finding one not only ready built but furnished as well.

We did not deceive ourselves or each other. We were frightened and homesick. Whatever we had pictured in our imaginations, it bore no resemblance to the tar-paper shack without creature comforts; nor had we counted on the desolation of the prairie on which we were marooned.

Before darkness should shut us in, we hurriedly scrambled through our provisions for a can of kerosene. Down in the trunk was a small lamp. We got it out and filled it. And then we faced each other, speechless, each knowing the other’s fear — afraid to voice it. Matches! They had not been on our list. I fumbled hastily through the old box cupboard with its few dust-covered odds and ends. Back in a corner was an old tobacco can. Something rattled lightly as I picked it up — matches!

We were too weary to light a fire. On a trunk which we used as a table, we spread a cold lunch, tried to swallow a few bites and gave it up. The empty space and the black night had swallowed us up.

“We might as well go to bed,” said Ida Mary dully.

“We’ll start back home in the morning,” I declared, “as soon as it is daylight.”

Oddly enough, we had never questioned the impulse which led two young city girls to go alone into unsettled land homesteading. Our people had been pioneers, always among those who pushed back the frontier. The Ammonses had come from Tennessee into Illinois in the early days and cleared the timberland along the Mississippi Valley some forty miles out of St. Louis. They built their houses of the hand-hewn logs and became land and stock owners. They were not sturdy pioneers, but they were tenacious.

Some of them went on into what Grandma Ammons called the Santa Fe Bottoms, a low marshy country along the river, where they became wealthy — or well-to-do, at least — by fattening droves of hogs on acorns. Generally speaking, my mother’s family ran to professions, and my father’s family to land.

Though there was father’s cousin, Jack Hunter, who had been west and when he came to visit us now and then told wild tales about the frontier to which my sister and I as little

children listened wide-eyed. He wove glowing accounts of the range country where he was going to make a million dollars raising cattle. Cousin Jack always talked big.

It was from his highly colored yarns that we had learned all we knew of the West — and from the western magazines which pictured it as an

FRANCES F. PALMER (CURRIER & IVES)
*The Rocky Mountains: Emigrants
 Crossing the Plains*

hand-colored lithograph on paper

GILCREASE 1526.552

exciting place where people were mostly engaged in shooting one another.

While Ida Mary and I were still very young our mother died, and after that we divided our time between our father's—he had married again and had a second family to take care of—and the home of his sister. As a result my sister and I came to depend on ourselves and on each other more than two girls of our age usually do.

By the time we were old enough to see that things were not going well financially at home, we knew we must make our own way. Some of the girls we knew talked about “going homesteading” as a wild adventure. They boasted of friends or relatives who had gone to live on a claim as though they had gone lion-hunting in Africa or gold-hunting in Alaska. A homestead. At first thought the idea was absurd. We were both very young; both unusually slight, anything but hardy pioneers; and neither of us had the slightest knowledge of homesteading conditions, or experience extending beyond the conventional, sheltered life of the normal city girl in the first decade of the century.

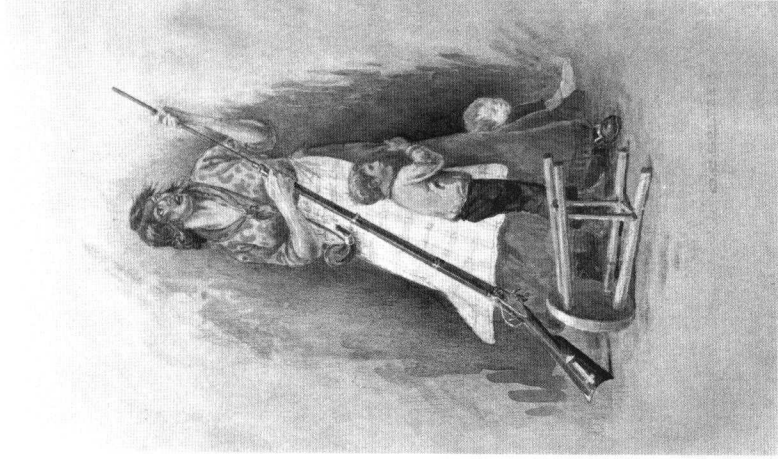
At that time the country was emerging from the era of straggling settlers. Immigration was moving west in a steady stream. The tidal wave which swept the West from 1908 to the World War was almost upon us although we could not see it then. But, we thought, there would be new people, new interests, and in the end 160 acres of land for Ida Mary. Perhaps for me the health I had sought so unsuccessfully. . . .

How did one go about homesteading? we asked. Well, all you had to do to get a deed to a quarter-section — 160 acres of land — was to file on it at the nearest Land Office, live on it eight months, pay the government \$1.25 an acre — and the land was yours. Easy as falling off a log!

The only improvement required by the government was some sort of abode as proof that one had made the land his bona-fide residence for the full eight months.

What would that cost? And the whole undertaking? It depended partly on what kind of shack one built and whether he did it himself or hired it done. A shack cost all the way from \$25 to \$100 or more. Some of those who had families and intended to stay, built cheap two- and three-room houses.

Of course, it cost women who had to hire things done more to homestead. But with grub, fuel and other necessities we figured it would cost not more than \$500 all told.



O.C. SELTZER

Pioneer Woman

pencil on paper

GILCREASE, 0237.1234

Then we learned of this quarter-section with a shack already built, bunk and all. It had been filed on and the owner had left before proving-up time so that the claim, shack and all, had reverted to the government. We had about \$300 saved up, and this was enough, we decided, to cover homesteading expenses, inasmuch as the shack was provided. So we had all but the final payment of \$200 to the government, which would be due when we had “made proof.”

We decided to let the money for that final payment take care of itself. The thing to do was to get hold of a piece of land before it was all gone. To hear people talk, it was the last day of grace to apply for a claim. They talked like that for ten years. We did not know there were several million acres lying out there between the Missouri and the Pacific waiting to be settled. We would have all winter to figure out how to prove up. And we found that one could get \$1000 to \$1500 for a raw claim after getting a deed to it.

The claim with the shack on it was in South Dakota, thirty miles from a town called Pierre. We looked that up in the geography to make sure it really existed. But when we tried to get detailed information, facts and figures to help us prepare for what was to come, we got only printed pamphlets of rules and regulations which were of no real help at all. Land Offices were so busy in those days that all they could do was to send out a package of printed information that no one could understand.

Armed with our meager array of facts, we talked to our father — as though the information we gave him so glibly had any real bearing on this precarious undertaking of his two young daughters. Whatever his doubts and hesitations, he let us decide for ourselves; it was only when we boarded the old Bald Eagle at St. Louis one summer day in 1907, bound up river, that he clung to our hands as though unable to let us go, saying “I’m afraid you are making a mistake. Take care of yourselves.”

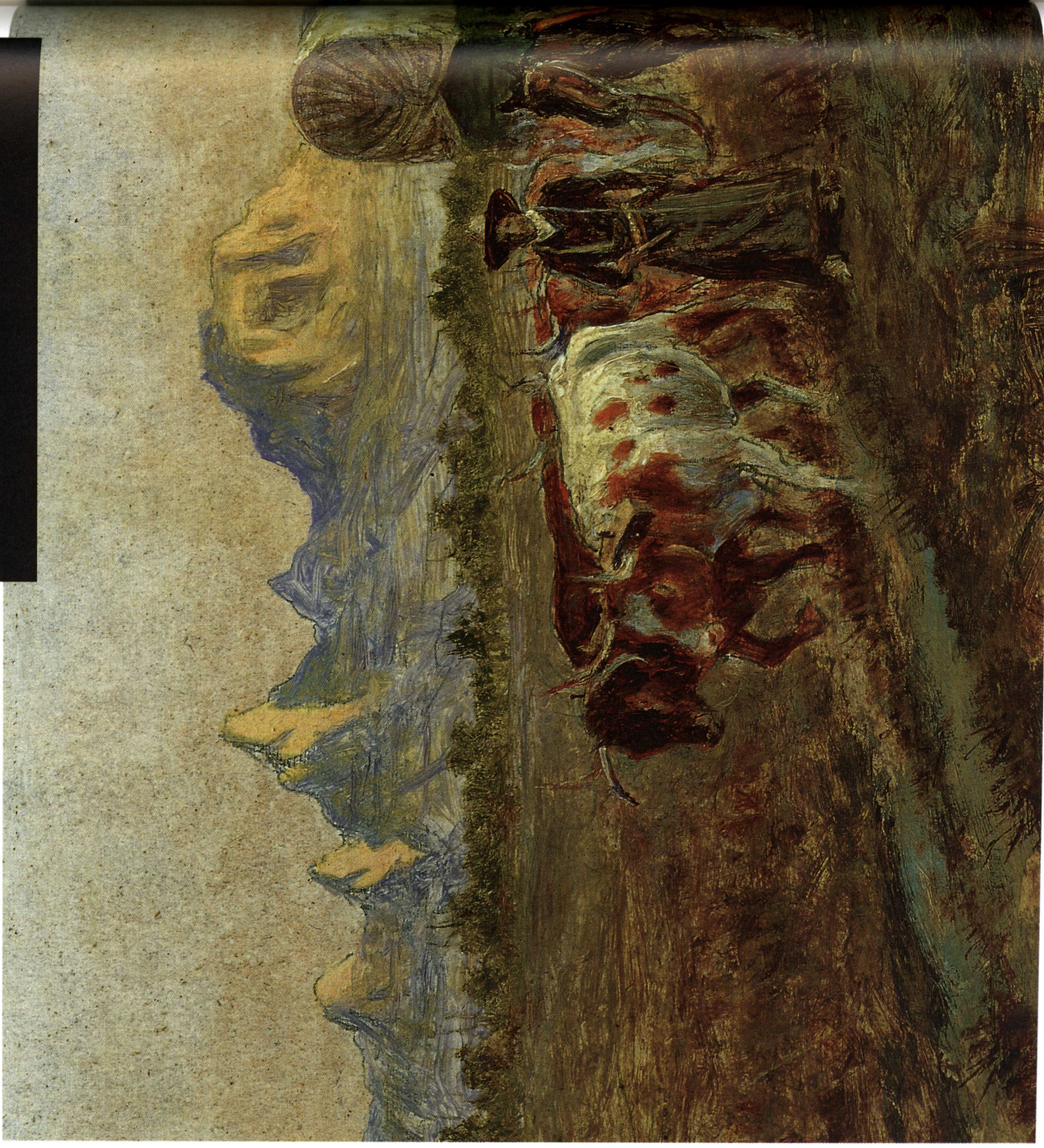
“It will be all right,” Ida Mary told him cheerfully. “It is only for eight months. Nothing can happen in eight months.”

[By the time we were in the old spring wagon with the driver on our way to our claim] our frantic haste to arrive while the land lasted seemed absurd. There was land enough for all who wanted it, and few enough to claim it. All that weary day we saw no people save in the distance a few homesteaders mowing strips of the short dry grass for hay. Now and then we passed a few head of horses and a cow grazing. Here and there over the hot, dusty plain we saw shacks and makeshift houses surrounded by patches of corn or flax or dried-up garden. Why were the houses so

O.C. SELTZER (1877-1957)
*Calamity Jane Bullwhacking in the
 Neighborhood of Townsend Montana*

oil on board
 GILCREASE, 0137.820

THIS WAS NOT THE WEST AS I HAD
 DREAMED OF IT, NOT THE WEST EVEN OF
 BANDITRY AND VIOLENT ACTION. IT WAS A
 DESOLATE, FORGOTTEN LAND, WITHOUT
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 LAND.



scattered, looking as though they had been thrown down at random? "They had to be set on the claims," our locator said dryly.

About noon we stopped at a deserted ranch house, surrounded by corrals — a camp, our driver explained, where some stockman held his cattle overnight in driving them to market. Here we ate a lunch and the locator fed and watered the team, refilling the jars from an old well with its long wooden water troughs.

There the trail ended. Now we struck out over a trackless land that grew rougher the farther we went. To look for a quarter-section here was like looking for a needle in a haystack. It was late summer and the sun beat down on the hot prairie grass and upon our heads. We had driven all day without sign of shade — save for that brief interval at noon, without sight of water. Our faces and hands were blistered, our throats parched from the hot wind.

This was not the West as I had dreamed of it, not the West even of banditry and violent action. It was a desolate, forgotten land, without vegetation save for dry, crackling grass, without visible tokens of fertility. Drab and gray and empty. Stubborn, resisting land. Heroics wouldn't count for much here. It would take slow, back-breaking labor, and time, and the action of the seasons to make the prairie bloom. People had said this was no place for two girls. It began to seem that they were right.

And this was the goal of our long journey — the tar-paper shack. We pushed the trunk over in front of the door which had no lock, piled the chairs and suitcases on top of the trunk; spread a comfort over the crisscross rope bed and threw ourselves across it without undressing. We had no gun or other



weapon for protection and were not brave enough to use one had we possessed it.

The little cellar windows which stood halfway between the low ceiling and the floor were nailed shut. But we needed neither window nor door, so far as air was concerned. It poured through the wide cracks like water through a sieve.

While we tossed, too tired and sick at heart to sleep, I asked: "What became of the young man who built this shack?"

"He lived here only a few weeks and abandoned it," Ida Mary explained. "The claim reverted to the government, shack, bunk and all. He couldn't stick it out."

The next morning we awoke to a world flooded with sunshine, and it was the surprise of our lives that we had lived to see it.

Ida started the oil stove and put on the coffee. Wearily I dragged myself out of bed. We fried bacon, made toast, unpacked our few dishes. Discovering that a hinged shelf on the wall was intended for a table, we put it up and set our breakfast on it. We found that we were really hungry.

Our determination to start back home was still unshaken, but we had reckoned without the prairies. We were marooned as on a desert island. And more pressing, even, than some way of getting back to Pierre — and home — was the need for water. We must get a jug of water somewhere. Water didn't come from a tap on the prairies. We began to wonder where it did come from; certainly there wasn't a drop to be found on Ida Mary's claim.

In the glaring morning sun which blazed on the earth, we saw a shack in the distance, the reflection of the sun on yellow boards. It was farther away than it appeared to be with the bright light against it.

This new home was larger than the regulation shack, and it had a gable — a low-pitched roof — which in itself was a symbol of permanence in contrast to the temporary huts that dotted the plains. It was

made of tongue-and-groove drop-siding, which did away with the need of tar paper, and in the homestead country marked a man's prestige and solidity.

We were met at the open door by a pretty, plump young woman. A little girl of seven stood quietly at one side, and a little boy, perhaps five, at the other. As we stood there with the jug she broke into a pleasant

WE WERE MAROONED AS ON A DESERT ISLAND. AND MORE PRESSING, EVEN, THAN SOME WAY OF GETTING BACK TO PIERRE — AND HOME — WAS THE NEED FOR WATER.

laugh. "You've come for water! We have no well, but Huey hauled two barrels this morning from Crook's, several miles away."

We were led into a large room, clean and cool. After one has been in a low, slant-roofed, tar-papered shack that becomes an oven when the sun shines on it, entering a house with a gable is almost like going into a refrigerator. There wasn't much in the room except beds and a sewing machine. The floor, on which a smaller child was playing, was bare except for a few rag rugs, but shining. An opening led into a small lean-to kitchen with a range in one corner; in the other a large square table spread with a checked tablecloth was set ready for the next meal, and covered with a mosquito bar. The home, the family, gave one a feeling of coming to anchor in a sea of grass and sky.

We learned that the name was Dunn and that they were dirt farmers from Iowa, but they had not come in time to do much farming that season. They had thrown up a make-shift barn as a temporary shelter for the horses and one cow until they could build a real barn — after they found out what the soil would do, Mrs. Dunn explained.

She hurried out to the kitchen, talking as she moved about, and came in with coffee and a plate of oatmeal cookies.

"I am so glad you are going to live here," she told us. "Neighbors within a mile and a half! I won't feel so much alone with neighbors close by to chat with."

We hadn't the courage to tell here that we weren't going to stay.

"You must have found the shack dirty," she said, with a glance at her spotless house. "A bachelor homesteader had it and they are always the worst. They wait until the floor is thick with dirt and grease and then spread newspapers over it to cover up the dirt. You'll have a time getting it fixed as you want it."

We wondered how anyone made a home of a tar-paper shack. To hear Mrs. Dunn's casual remarks, one would think it no more of a problem than redecorating a city home.

As we started on the trek back, she called after us, "Huey will haul you over a keg of water tomorrow."

As soon as we were out of earshot I said, "We can hire Mr. Dunn to take us back to Pierre."

"That's an idea," Ida Mary agreed

By the time we had walked back the mile and a half — which seemed five in the scorching heat — it was past noon and we were completely exhausted. So we did not get started back to Pierre that day. But we felt a little easier. There was a way to get out. †



Legends

T E R E S A J O R D A N

MY GRANDFATHER disliked children and cats. He was a grand old ranchman who pulled his boots on first and his britches on after, who never went outside without a hat. He chain-smoked Camels, pinched between thumb and middle finger or dangling from the corner of his mouth. Sunny — even my brother and I called him my his nickname — would never have held a smoke “like a goddamned dilettante,” between two outstretched fingers, and he flicked the butts a good ten yards after snubbing them out. He dressed meticulously, in starched khaki shirts and five-button Levi’s, pressed to a knife-edged crease.

Sunny was crippled up from too many bad horses and too much bad weather. I don’t remember ever seeing him ride; I only remember him angry that he couldn’t. He sometimes stomped from the house and roared away in his Cadillac to find the hired men and cause some sort of trouble for my dad, but mostly he stayed home and surveyed the ranch from the picture windows of his second-floor apartment in the Big House.

I learned to count by playing blackjack with Sunny while the big Siamese slept on his lap. In the summer, if the cat went hunting or I helped outside, my grandfather would scowl around downstairs. “Where’s the damn cat?” he’d ask my mother. “Where is that kid?”

I feared my grandfather but I also loved him. He played fair, and he played often. He wasn’t much of a talker; mostly, he chewed on a toothpick and studied his cards. Still, he taught me necessary lessons. By the time I started school, I knew better that to cut a blackjack deck, touch my cards before the deal was done, or expose my own good fortune with a smile. Occasionally, he would reminisce, like the time the song “House of the Rising Sun” came on the old Philco. “I was there once,” he said of the Louisiana whorehouse as he gazed out the window. And then, as if he remembered he was with me and not my brother, he flicked his cards abruptly. “Hit me,” he said. I dealt him a queen. He tossed his toothpick in my pile.

Sunny received his nickname, I’ve been told, from his sunny disposition. By the time I knew him, he was

Sunny died when I was eighteen, and I came home from my freshman year of college for the funeral. At the grave site, I broke down. Though my tears surprised that gathering of Westerners bred never to reveal emotion, they surprised no one more than me. I had not realized before how much I cared for Sunny, how much that man who disliked cats and children cared for me.

During all the time I spent with Sunny, he told me few family stories. About the founder of the Jordan Ranch, Sunny's father and my Great-grandfather J.L., he told me only one, but he told it often. It was the Family Legend, the story of J.L.'s coming to Wyoming, a story as important to my grandfather as a creation myth is to the Mandan Indian. It went like this.

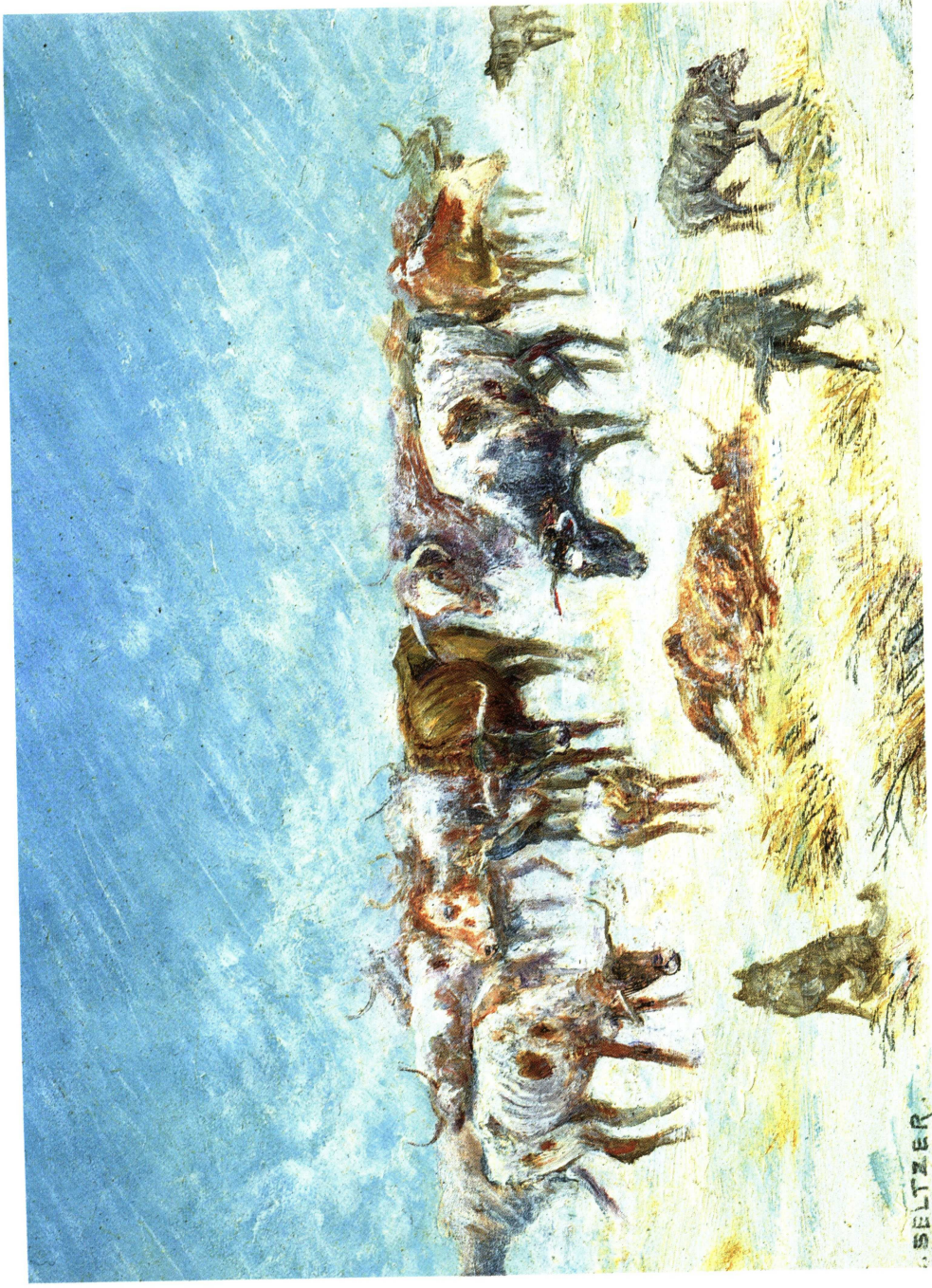
J.L. grew up in Maryland. When the Civil War broke out, he wanted to join his brothers who had already gone to fight. But J.L. was just fourteen and his parents said no. He did the only thing a self-respecting fourteen-year-old could do — he ran away from home. The war ended before J.L. arrived at the front; since he couldn't go back to his family, he started out West. He worked his way across the country, building bridges in Illinois and railroads in Nebraska. When he arrived in Wyoming, he went to work for a fellow named Collins on Chugwater Creek. Collins died and J.L. was owed a couple of years' wages; he took out a mechanic's lien and got title to what would become the core of the Jordan Ranch. Through the years Great-grandfather bought more cattle and more land, and he never wrote home until he had made himself into a success.

It's a splendid story, one which I have told through the years with pride. The only problem is, it's not quite true. J.L. was born in 1861. He would have been four years old when Lee surrendered. In fact, he didn't



WILL JAMES
III 24

WILL JAMES (1892 - 1942)
Where the Bronco Twister Got His Name
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0137.1471



O. C. SELTZER (1877-1957)
The Blizzard of 1886-87
 oil on board
 GILCREASE, 0137.795

leave home until the fall of 1886, at the age of twenty-five, and then with the family's blessing. He did work his way across the country, he did take a job with Collins on Chugwater Creek, and he did end up with title in lieu of wages. But he had not severed ties with his paternal home, as my grandfather would have it. Rather, J.L.'s Western adventure was tightly interwoven with the folks back home.

"Have been looking for a letter from Home all this week," J.L. wrote his father in November 1886 from Ashland, Nebraska, where he worked with a bridge gang. "Have been thinking a good bit about Home and last night one year ago when Ma died," he wrote the following February.

In Cheyenne, the family network helped him establish himself. He boarded with a Presbyterian minister from Virginia who knew his family. Collins, too, was not a complete stranger: he was the cousin of J.L.'s betrothed, Laura Jeannette Liggitt. Later, J.L. borrowed money from his

father to buy a herd in partnership with Collins.

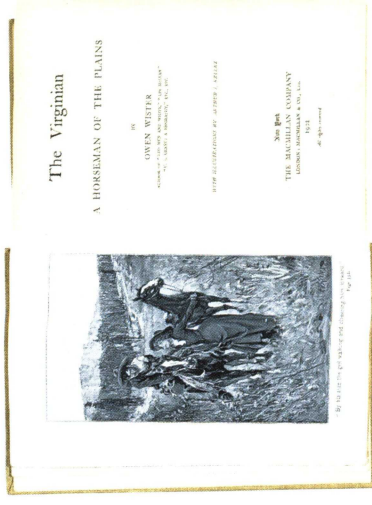
And J.L. never quit pining for home. "I am well and enjoying myself pretty well although think could enjoy myself better in Md," he wrote in November of 1887. "But have not forgotten the old lesson you taught me. Business before pleasure." His letters are full of pleas for his father to visit, and for his brothers to take up land nearby.

Even the first record I have from Sunny shows the family tie. "Dear Grandpa," he wrote at the age of six, on August 27, 1898, to J.L.'s father back in Maryland, "We have 200 calves. We are breaking 2 colts, 1 black and 1 buck-skin. I like to take care of my sister. Tell Uncle Otho I have a good saddle. He had better come back. Good bye. Frank Jordan."

It's not surprising that Sunny's version of the Family Legend departs from the fact. As one historian has suggested, history is what we remember; personal history, I suspect, is what we want to believe. What is interesting is not that the story changed, but that it changed in such predictable ways. Sunny turned his father into an orphan cast into the Western wilderness alone; a prodigal who returned to his familial home only in triumph and never to stay, who raised his own fattened calf, branded it, and shipped it east in a railroad car.

A little over a year and a half before J.L. reached Iron Mountain, another young man from the East passed through. On Independence Day, 1885, twenty-five-year-old Owen Wister spent the night at a stage station on Chugwater Creek. "We're 8200 feet up in the air & it's cold," he wrote his mother. "The air is better than all other air. Each breath you take tells you no one else has ever used it before you — the scenery would not please you except now & then. It's very wild & desolate."

This was Wister's first trip West. He would one day write *The Virginian*, a novel about an orphan who left home at the age of fourteen and came to Wyoming. It would sell more copies than any other Western. For now, the young Harvard graduate was getting a taste of the West on orders from his doctor, a prescribed rest cure for "hysteria" — blinding headaches, terrifying dreams, hallucinations. When he left Wyoming at the end of his two-month trip, his health was much improved and he had fallen in love with the West. He entered Harvard Law, but probably he had already made up his mind to be a writer. In 1892, the same year that J.L.'s twelve-pound son was delivered kicking and screaming into the high Wyoming air, Wister published his first Western stories. . . . †



Pulp Fiction: Writing for the Western Magazines

BY ELMER KELTON

GROWING UP ON A TEXAS RANCH, I learned early that there were two Wests.

I saw the real working West around me every day; it had cattle, horses, and cowboys who labored hard and heavy from before daylight in the morning until sundown, sometimes later. Most of them enjoyed the life, but it was one of intense heat and cold, sweat, mud and exhaustion. Horseback work with cattle tended to be a little like war; long periods of tedium punctuated by moments of high excitement and occasionally panic. And much of the work was not even a-horseback; it involved posthole diggers, picks and shovels, windmill tools, and feed sacks that weighed a hundred pounds . . . hardly the material of a Zane Grey adventure.

EDMUND F. WARD (1892-?)

AMERICAN

Enter the Law

oil on canvas, 1924

GILCREASE, 0117.1248





RANCH ROMANCES, COVER AND INTERIOR SPREAD

R*anch Romances* was one of the most popular of the pulp westerns. Like the other “pulp” publications, it was printed on inexpensive wood-pulp paper, a cousin to the paper now used for the mass-market paperback books available at grocery checkouts and other high-visibility locations.

The other West, the one that fired the imagination, was peopled by pistol-packing heroes fighting long odds in the name of justice and civilization. This was the world of western novels, Saturday-matinee “B” western movies, and action-packed western pulp magazines, where tedium found no tolerance and excitement was guaranteed. It was a world different from mine, yet with enough roots in my reality to allow me to imagine it really had been that way “in the old days.”

My mother read western stories to me before I was old enough to read them for myself. A cousin introduced me to Zane Grey, and I found Will James’s horse-and-cowboy novel *Smoky*, and others like it, in our school library, though the number of such books available to me was limited. I loved western movies and reveled in the adventures of Buck Jones and Ken Maynard, but we lived nine miles from town and only occasionally could I wangle a ride to a Saturday matinee.

Pulp magazines were plentiful, however, and new issues kept appearing weekly or monthly. Every drugstore had a rack of pulps stacked as high as I could reach, and every ranch bunkhouse had a pile of them in a corner somewhere, collected by working cowboys who loved them just as I did. Pulp magazines came in genres other than western. There were detective pulps, aviation pulps, war pulps, romance pulps, science-fiction and fantasy pulps and I occasionally read one of another genre so long as it involved adventure, but my real interest centered on the westerns.

The pulps had a personality different from that of slick-paper magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s* and *Liberty*. Their covers were colorful, even garish, usually depicting scenes of violent action. I remember one in particular that featured a cowboy on a

running horse, its reins in his teeth, blazing six-guns in both hands, a scene John Wayne re-created years later in *True Grit*. You can bet that if I had a dime, I bought that magazine. The names of the publications said action — *44 Western*, *Two-Gun Western*, *Wild West Weekly*, *Thrilling Western*, *Texas Rangers*, *Gunsmoke Western* — and their stories bore names like “Let’s Shoot Us a Sheriff,” “Texans Don’t Ride Out Alive,” “Texas Guns Roar,” and “The Man from Satan’s Range.”

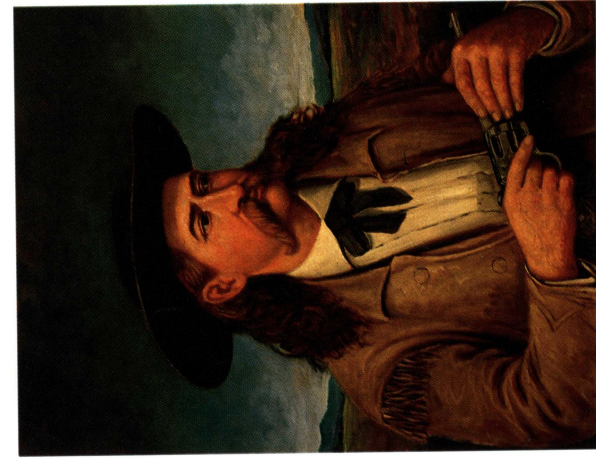
Story titling of a purple hue was an editorial tradition with the pulps. One of my own stories was once dubbed by the publisher “She-Wolf of the Brush Country.” I winced when I saw it on the cover, along with my name and a picture of a leering villain about to burn a girl’s bared shoulder with the glowing tip of a cigar. I once asked veteran pulp writer S. Omar Barker how he felt about the lurid and misleading titles sometimes placed on his stories. He had long since accommodated to such indignities, he replied, so long as they spelled his name right on the check.

The word “pulp” came from the cheap grade of printing paper used by the action magazines. This paper had a rough, masculine feel to it,

OLAF C. SELTZER (1877-1957)
AMERICAN, BORN DENMARK
*Kid Curry Killing Pike Landusky in
Jew Jake’s Saloon, Landusky, Montana*
— 1885

oil on board
GILCREASE, 0137.826





suggestive of the rough-and-tumble action stories printed upon it. It even had a faint but distinctive and pleasant odor that evoked a man's world of outdoor adventure. The pulps had another feature especially appealing to boys, a raffish aura of being less than respectable, the whiff of stolen pleasure. Teachers branded the pulps low-grade literature at best, even contraband if a boy happened to be caught with one in a classroom. To smuggle a western pulp into school was almost equivalent to sneaking a cedar-bark cigarette behind the barn. It was deliciously wicked.

The pulps had their beginnings soon after the Civil War in the "penny dreadfuls" where Ned Buntline and his contemporaries published fanciful fictions and made household names of real-life personages such as Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, and Jesse James. The form as I first knew it came into its own after the first World War. It had its heyday from the 1920s through the war years of the 1940s, then slid into a slow-death decline that brought the demise of the last and best by the late 1950s.

Pulps were never intended to be an educational medium. Their function was low-cost escapism, entertainment pure and simple.

Typically they were priced at a dime, or as little as a nickel during Depression days. Trading might allow one magazine to pass through several hands before it disintegrated or was discarded, making the per-reader investment a few pennies at most. *Ranch Romances*, one of the last traditional Western pulps to die, still cost only a quarter when it ceased publication late in the 1950s.

Stories could be ridiculously unrealistic when written by people who knew little about the West. One English writer mistakenly assumed that the coyote was a bird and had it soaring majestically on silent wings over the moonlit prairie. However, many pulp writers were native westerners, sometimes ex-cowboys, whose yarns had foundations in reality even while they emphasized the sensational. S. Omar Barker, once proclaimed the "poet lariat" of New Mexico, was a case in point. His stories tended to be gentle and humorous and, in comparison to most pulp tales, had minimum or no gunplay.

Walt Coburn was an Arizona cowboy who became known as the



king of the western pulp writers. He could smoke-'em-up with the best, but his characters usually had something unusual and interesting about them. The openings of his stories were often fresh and surprising enough to sink the hook in a reader even though the bulk of a story was likely to fall into familiar but comfortable six-gun formula. His backgrounds derived from experience and his cowboys never rode a horse a hundred miles in a high lope or killed a villain at two hundred yards with a six-shooter. Sometimes they even worked cattle. One of my personal favorites as a reader was Montanan W. C. Turtle, another veteran of the real West, who peopled his yarns with delightful characters like Hash Knife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens, and provided chuckles as well as thrills.

NEWELL CONVERS WYETH (1882-1945)
AMERICAN
The James Brothers in Missouri
oil on canvas
GILCREASE, 0127.1544



Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie had little use for action westerns and seemed to bear a particular grudge against Zane Grey. Even so, he acknowledged that most were simply idle at worst, not malicious, and lacked the contempt for audience and subject matter he found in most Hollywood westerns. Had he lived to see them, he would have been appalled at the blood-spattered, sadistic films of the spaghetti-western era or the paperbacks of the thankfully short-lived X-rated ilk that for a time crowded far superior westerns out of rack space during part of the 1970s and 1980s. For all their emphasis on action and gunplay, the pulps almost never resorted to such sick excess. Even the few that featured the word “spicy” in their titles were Sunday-school lessons compared to the average run of today’s popular fiction.

Though academia usually condemned the pulps as trash fiction, at their best they contained much good writing, a creditable amount of wheat amidst the chaff. Even the critical Dobie admitted that “if a serious reader went through the hundreds of titles produced by William McLeod Raine, Dan Coolidge, Eugene Cunningham, B. M. Bower, the late Ernest Haycox, and other manufacturers of range novels, he would find, spottily, a surprising amount of truth about land and men, a fluency in genuine cowboy lingo, and a respect for the code of conduct.”

As a class, pulp stories were bound to the action formula demanded by editors and readers, but within that limitation many authors often managed surprisingly strong and inventive work. Would-be writers sometimes assumed that the pulps were simple-minded and undemanding, that it should be very easy to break into the market. Quick rejection of their submissions usually disabused them of that notion.

As the pulps matured through the 1920s and 1930s, basic craftsmanship became increasingly important. Stories had to move. They had to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Images had to be



RANCH ROMANCES COVER AND
INTERIOR SPREAD

Pulp publishers used sensationalistic covers to draw attention in the competitive environment of the newsstand — an approach still followed by the publishers of mass market paperbacks, who see book covers as prime advertising space.



RANCH ROMANCES AND LEADING WESTERNS

Pulp fiction developed its own rules of conduct, as western movies and television series would later do. As in the mythic West, it was always easy to tell the heroes from the villains. Readers enjoyed the suspenseful tension of an action-packed plot but liked the predictability of format.

sharp and clear, and motivations — both of heroes and villains — strong. None of the mindless barroom confrontations of poor film scripts that had characters exclaiming, “I don’t like your face.” Bang! Or, “You drink bourbon, but I like rye, so I’m gonna plug ya!” Pulp writers, especially those who wrote for a living, had to take a serious, professional attitude. Most gave it their best within the limitations of time and resources. If they didn’t, they would soon find themselves without a market.

It was an adage in the field that a writer should grab the reader’s attention from the start, should “drop a body through the roof in the first paragraph.” Few stories were so literally blatant, but successful stories opened with at least a suggestion of trouble and travail. Norman A. Fox’s “Gun-Smoke Grandstander” in the January 30, 1943, issue of *Western Story* began like this:

Through all of the uneventful day the stage had rolled across this serene and yellow range, and now that nightfall was coming the danger came with it, a surge of riders boiling out from the shadow of an overhanging bluff beside the road. “A holdup!” Starr McAllister, the lone passenger, decided, and reached for his gun, a fancy silver-mounted .45 keeping with the rest of his garish garb. But he reached too late. The stage had jolted to a bone-jarring stop, and Starr found himself peering into the black bore of a leveled gun.

The short first paragraph of “Trigger Ghost,” by Sam H. Nickels, in the December 12, 1942, issue of *Wild West Weekly* had an even sharper hook:

The murdered mine boss lay sprawled upon his face just beyond his looted safe. One side of his head was a crimson smear, and a sawed-off shotgun that he had evidently tried to use lay among some trampled papers near one of his stiffened hands. The Skeleton Killer had struck again.

Once underway, the action seldom paused for the author to give lengthy description, as Zane Grey was sometimes wont to do in his novels, where a paragraph or two might be devoted to a sunset. A skilled writer like Bennett Foster could describe a scene in a few carefully-chosen words so that the reader saw it clearly in his mind without losing the thread of the story. This is from his “Man Tracks,” in the same issue of *Western Story* as the Fox novelette:

Below the ridge the settlement of Handout squatted by the Rio Bosque, cottonwoods sprinkling it and making a pattern of light and shade on dusty street and adobe buildings. At the west end of town was a blacksmith shop and wagon yard, lifeless for all that the men on the ridge could see. East of the wagon yard was a store building, a single horse in front of it, and then, after a vacant space, a long, low adobe saloon. About a hundred yards beyond this building were two more —

an adobe, and a mongrel structure composed of wood, tin and mud; and then no more, only the twisting road crawling through brush to the Rio Bosque’s ford.

Notice that midway through the paragraph he reminds the reader that the scene is being viewed through the eyes of the men on the ridge, who are carrying the action. Notice too that the description never stops moving; the mind’s eye drifts steadily down the short street and out the other end of town. This is craftsmanship, but it is also art.

Except for the romance westerns, most notably *Ranch Romances*, the audience was perceived to be almost entirely male. Female characters in most male-oriented stories had little function beyond looking pretty, and sometimes getting themselves in jeopardy so the hero could rescue them. As Colorado pulpster Stephen Payne commented, the heroine’s role was “to be chased and chased, but to remain forever chaste.” Many stories contained no women at all and they would frequently have been out of place in the locations and situations which were the genre’s stock in trade.

Pulps did not pay big money. Probably most stories published during their heyday paid one to two cents a word — fifty to a hundred dollars for a short story. During the Depression, many good writers settled for half a cent and were glad to get it. Even afterward, stories rejected by the better magazines sometimes went to salvage market for half a cent, from the writer’s point of view preferable to consigning several days’ work to the wastebasket. Highly popular writers like Walt Coburn and Max Brand, whose names guaranteed extra sales, were elevated to the three- to five-cent range.

Although I had known since I was eight or nine years old that I wanted to be a writer, I was a Johnny-come-lately to the pulp field. My mother read to me from *Ranch Romances*, which she occasionally brought home from town with the groceries. I loved to read stories, and at an early age I began trying to write my own. After my return from infantry service in World War II, it was time to get serious and begin writing to sell.

Like many other beginning writers, I had assumed that breaking into the pulps would be a snap, that they would welcome my superior stories like a breath of fresh air. I was about to be administered a stiff dose of humility. My first stories were rejected so quickly that I was sure some were beating me home from the post office. I realized I needed more than just the will to write; I had to learn the craft.

My financial situation was tight, but I invested a dollar or so in a grocery sack full of outdated western magazines at a second-hand store

FREDERIC REMINGTON (1861-1909)

AMERICAN

Missing

oil on canvas

GILCREASE, 0126.638

The “captive story” became popular in fiction, and was expressed in some western paintings. It endured as a theme in the popular culture for many years, re-emerging in film, for example in the movie

The Man Called Horse. While historical fact lay behind some such tales, they were more deeply rooted in psychological aspects of the clash between white and Native cultures, so alien to each other. The “culture collision tale” continues in the late 20th century in movies such as *E. T.*

about interactions between earthlings and representatives of other planets.

and began to study them. I analyzed the stories I liked, trying to determine why they appealed to me, studying plot structure, descriptions, characterizations. I copied long passages on my typewriter to get a feel for the author’s use of the language, for his technique.

I studied the work of contemporary favorites Ernest Haycox and Luke Short, both graduates of the pulp field. I dissected and analyzed stories by such writers as Wayne D.

Overholser, who was reaching the peak of his pulp form at about that time. Overholser, later a personal friend, was beginning to introduce new ideas into his stories. I was more than a little surprised when an unmarried female character turned up pregnant, an extreme rarity in the morally-staid pulps. In another novelette, a storm forced his hero and heroine to spend the night together in a barn, something never dreamed of in the *Wild West Weekly* of my youth. I became convinced that pulp writing was more complex and more demanding than I had imagined.

Printed rejection slips kept coming with dismaying regularity, but I also began receiving short letters of encouragement from Fanny Ellsworth, editor of *Ranch Romances*. She would tell me briefly why she had to reject my stories, outlining my more grievous shortcomings. Finally, in my last semester before graduation from the journalism department of the University of Texas, she bought a story named “There’s Always Another Chance,” a title which in retrospect reflects the attitude that kept me writing despite all those rejections.

That sale, netting me fifty dollars, I saw as a long step toward fame and fortune. From now on it should be easy. But it was not. A year later, after many more rejections, I finally sold a second story. Gradually I



began selling a larger and larger percentage of the stories I wrote nights and Sundays as an adjunct to a full-time job as an agricultural journalist. I alternated between action stories and benign humorous yarns modeled after those I had admired by Barker and Tuttle. Though arithmetic had never been my long suit, I realized that a 20,000-word novelette brought four times as much as a 5,000-word short story and could be handled with one set of characters and one central plot line instead of four, so I began writing the longer stories that would eventually lead to my novels.

I had come into the pulps in their twilight days. They were already in decline by the time my first story was published, and my writing could not save them. In fact, on gloomy days I wonder if I may not have hastened the funeral.

Most observers agree that a principal factor in the demise of the



pulps was television. As an entertainment medium it furnished an alternative to the type of pleasure reading the pulps and even the slick-paper magazines had provided. The pulps dropped out of existence one by one. The pulp rack at the corner drugstore dwindled, then disappeared. My old standby market, *Ranch Romances*, held out to the bitter end but finally gave up the ghost. It had a short reincarnation,

reprinting old stories, including several of mine, to which it had originally bought all rights and did not have to pay again, but even that cost-cutting measure did not save it. An era had passed. Gone with the pulps was a bread and butter market for many professional writers who occasionally sold to the big-money slicks but depended on pulp sales to pay rent and buy groceries.

Even the slicks did not survive the pulps very long. *Collier's* dropped out first, leaving the final chapter of a Luke Short serial unpublished. As a courtesy to readers, *Post* published the chapter. But shortly it too gave up the fight. It came back in later years but in a different format.

Many pulp writers were able to make the transition to paperback original novels, and a few such as Thomas Thompson, Tom Blackburn, D. B. Newton and William R. Cox found new homes in television during the big

western boom of the late 1950s and 1960s. But some of the once-popular old-timers never made the conversion. The paperbacks, despite their pulp origins, demanded a different style, a subtler and more polished story, more characterization and less slam-bang action for its own sake. These writers found themselves without a market. One of the best, whom I had met at an early Western Writers of America convention, fell into despair

WILLIAM R. LEIGH (1866-1955)

AMERICAN

A Close Call

oil on canvas

GILCREASE, 0127 2232

and took his own life. Others simply retired from the fray.

Had the pulps survived, they would no doubt have continued to change just as they had changed from the freewheeling days of Ned Buntline's Buffalo Bill to the last roundup of the 1950s. They would change as the paperback originals have changed, reaching for an ever more sophisticated and more demanding audience.

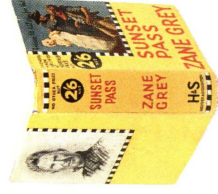
Now and then an attempt is made to resurrect the western pulp. A California-based magazine known as *Far West* made a valiant effort for a

time beginning in 1978, publishing stories of superior quality and considerable variety. More recently, the Louis L'Amour *Western Magazine* followed a similar path but in a slick-paper format. It provided a new market for the Western short story, which for practical purposes had been dormant for forty years except for occasional anthologies.

From a literary standpoint, a tragic side effect of the demise of both pulp and slick magazines has been the near death of the time-honored short story, not only in the western genre but others as well. Except for obscure academic publications with relatively little

circulation among the general public, short stories have found very limited outlet during the past four decades. Two generations of readers have grown up with scant exposure to this once-dominant literary medium. Besides standing proud on its own merits, the short story once was a great training ground for beginning writers. Its demands exacted a strict discipline that served writers well if they moved into other forms, usually the novel. It called for the writer to set the stage, introduce the situation and the characters, resolve (or sometimes not resolve) the basic problem in 5,000 carefully-crafted words, and get off the stage. Many of today's best-selling novels would be much better if their authors had the benefit of this training discipline.

I am glad I came along in time to serve an apprenticeship in those pulp magazines of sacred memory. I regret that young beginning writers are denied the privilege.

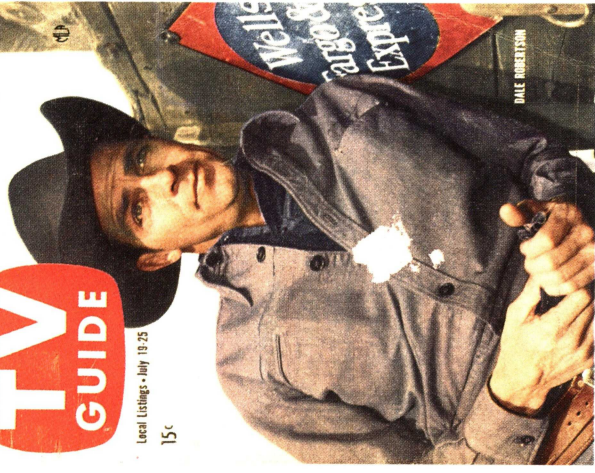


THE DAYS THE STARS WOULD RATHER FORGET
See Page 14

TV
GUIDE

Local Listings • July 19-25

15c



TV GUIDE FROM 1958 FEATURING

DALE ROBERTSON

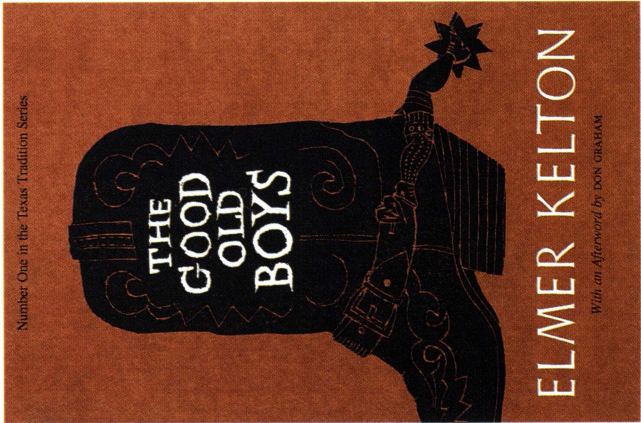
For a generation more attuned to the screen than the page, television series like *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* took up where the pulps left off. All across the nation in the mid-1950s “baby boomers” sat rapt before their television sets wearing plastic holsters and cowboy hats.



In four compelling novels, Elmer Kelton has written the history of the American West at a time of profound change. Set in west Texas from the 1880s to the 1980s, Kelton's novels chronicle the memorable lives and often-violent times of four men caught in the crossfire of competing values.

THE DAY THE COWBOYS QUIT
In the early 1880s, the world of Texas cowboys and ranchers was undergoing dramatic and often painful change. Attracted by the promise of quick profits in a rapidly expanding livestock market, big land and cattle companies bankrolled by absentee investors sought to dominate the range.

Cowboys who valued personal independence and old-time ways were increasingly viewed as mere employees. Based on the events of the abortive Texas Panhandle cowboy strike at old Tascosa in 1883, *The Day the Cowboys Quit* tells the story



of Hugh Hitchcock and others caught up in a moment of passage from one world to another. The failure of the strike and the tensions in Hitchcock's own life are at the heart of a compelling and disturbing story about personal honor, traditional values, and corporate greed.

THE GOOD OLD BOYS
Some readers find Hewey Calloway, the central figure in *The Good Old Boys*, a comic character without the subtle complexities of Kelton's other west Texas cowboys. But a closer reading of this novel reveals a Hewey Calloway every bit as interesting as Hugh Hitchcock or the central character in *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, Wes Hendrix. Those men were trapped between old ways and modern life. Hewey Calloway was in the same predicament. Set in west Texas in the first years of the 20th century, *The Good Old Boys* is all about one cowboy trying to find his way in a world of telephones, automobiles, windmills, and barbed wire fences. The spirited talks between Hewey and his young nephew Cotton highlight the tension between well-worn traditions and a passion for things new and mechanical.

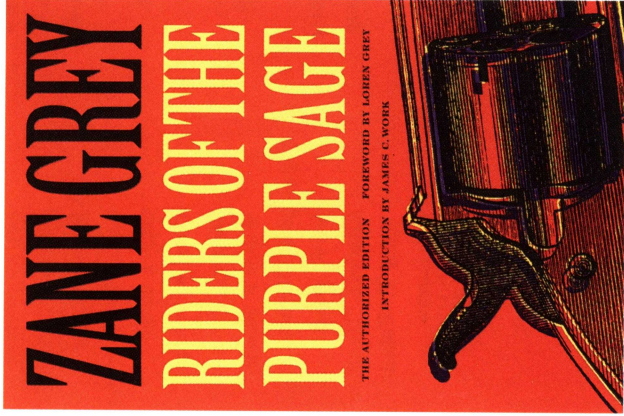
THE TIME IT NEVER RAINED

In the 1950s, large parts of the Great Plains were caught in a drought as devastating as the earlier one that helped bring about the Dust Bowl Era. *The Time It Never Rained* recounts the drought in west Texas by telling the powerful story of Charlie Flagg and his neighbors in the town of Rio Seco. While many of his neighbors embraced federal loans and subsidies as a way to ride out hard times, Flagg's fierce independence kept him from such temptations. But even a devoted loyalty to traditional values could not bring rain. There are no happy endings here — only relentless change and ceaseless struggle. Many readers find this to be Kelton's most memorable novel, and students of western literature have agreed.



THE MAN WHO RODE MIDNIGHT

What does it mean that the value of a man is somehow tied to riding one mean horse? This book is all about a fundamental (perhaps *the* fundamental) clash of values in the modern West. Wes Hendrix represents and embodies a traditional set of values, ones rooted in the deeply personal, highly individualistic world of ranching. By the 1970s and



1980s, that rural world was under assault and near collapse. Mounting debt, unstable global markets, and suburbanization put Wes and his values in harm's way. *The Man Who Rode Midnight* gives names and faces to the troubled West, a place where the "crabgrass frontier" is rapidly swallowing the range.

RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE
BY ZANE GREY

Riders of the Purple Sage, perhaps more than any other novel, contributed to the mystic concept of the American West. It has the classic elements of the western genre: the mysterious gunfighter, the outlaw boss and his masked accomplice, the frontier woman torn between love and law, the laconic cowboy, abduction, pistol duels, pursuits, and escapes. Within this tale of conflict and suspense the reader becomes an essential participant in the unfolding drama that lays bare the raw life of the American frontier.

THE WESTERN STORY: A
CHRONOLOGICAL TREASURY
EDITED BY JOHN TUSKA

"Only when courage and hope are gone will the western story cease to be relevant to all of us," wrote John Tuska in the introduction to this compilation of twenty stories from best-selling western fiction authors, 1892 to 1994. Taken as a whole, the stories comprise one of the most important literary movements in U.S. history and represent a unique body of literature this country has contributed to world culture.

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WHAT WAS

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BOTH REAL

AND

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