

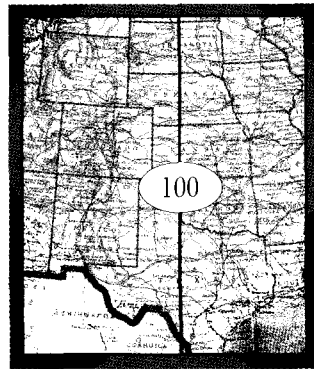
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

The View From Mount Nebo

Last summer this expansive sagebrush basin at the lower end of the Wyoming Range made the annual encampment of the Rainbow Family of Living Light, spawn of a congestive civilization. Fifteen thousand strong, they organized according to their various pursuits: drinking, drugs, nudity, fornication, and—for all the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department knows—cannibalism and human sacrifice. The Rainbows hung on for most of the season and chose for this summer's jamboree the state of New Mexico, home to several tribes of Apache Indians who have not forgotten their old practice of burning intruders head downward. In late July or early August they allowed a campfire to get away from them, but the blaze was extinguished with the help of the Big Piney Fire Department before it could burn its way into the timber. Now Snider Basin stretched peacefully, intact and empty, between Deadline Ridge, Mount Thompson, and Mount Darby as I approached from the northeast on the dirt road from Big Piney, the horse trailer rumbling behind the truck in the looping red curves above Porcupine Creek. Beyond the pioneer graves on the Lander Cutoff of the Oregon Trail I turned into a rutted track ascending to a bench above South Piney Creek and parked at the edge of a spit of forest running into the sagebrush. Already the sun was trying to fit itself into the groove where the creek emerged from the mountains between Darby and Thompson, and the air had begun to chill. The guard station half a mile out stood deserted, and the wind coming down from the mountains at the close of the day was the only humanly audible sound except for that of the horses stamping impatiently in their tin box.

I untied them through the manger doors, opened the big ones to the rear, let down the butt-bars, and drew them out by their tails. The headed grass beneath a stand of lodgepole pines waved smoothly on the wind. I led the horses to it, picketed the gelding on 30 feet of rosined lasso, and, leaving the mare to trail her lead rope as she grazed, walked back to the big lightning-stricken pine



half of whose trunk had been removed by the blow. Four years later it stood strongly, its pulp unrotted, still bearing needles from the thrusting branches of its uninjured side. I walked round the tree several times, observing the surrounding ground. Then I walked over to another tree and went round it. Finally I returned to the hurt tree and scraped the grass with the side of my boot sole until I had removed the duff, twigs, pinecones, and fragments of rock from an area six feet long by three wide. When the ground was perfectly smooth I returned to the truck for the horsepack, which I lifted onto my shoulder. The canvas bottom was slick and hard with horse grease. I carried the pack to the edge of the space I had cleared and dropped it with a dull clank on the ground. I had packed it at home the night before with everything I would need for three days in the mountains. Then I unstuffed the sleeping bag and spread it on the even ground above the soft green grass.

Enough firewood lay around for suttee, dry as if it had come from a kiln. I gathered several armloads and removed the fired rocks at the center of the fire ring I had built four years before. There was no need of kindling. When the fire was burning hotly, ragged and orange with very little smoke, I brought the camp baskets from the truck and lifted out the bottle of red wine. Having forgotten the camp knife with the corkscrew on it, I had to push in the cork with a screwdriver, splashing a pattern of pink stains across the front of my blue work shirt. I would wear them comfortably for three days now. I poured some of the wine into a plastic cup and settled my back against the rough bark of the tree. I set the cup on the pine needles,

leaned forward to place the grill across the fire that was already burning down to coals, and sat back against the tree again, drinking wine.

The sun went down and the evening star arose behind Deadline Ridge. A coyote on the forest's edge 200 yards from camp raised a wicked whoop, and received a chorusing reply from a pack over on Coal Creek. The cries began just as darkness fell, and ended with its completion. Far back in the mountains a strangled bugle sounded as a young bull elk tested his breaking voice for the coming rut. I went to check on the horses and move the gelding's picket. Back at the fire I filled a pan with water from the bladder, and set it on the grill. Using the camp knife I opened a can of red beans and put the beans in a second pan beside it. When the water boiled I added a bag of minute rice, and when the rice was done poured off the water and added the beans to it. I poured another glass of the wine and ate the beans and rice together in one pan, seated on a pine stump I had dragged over. After I was through I filled the pan from which I had eaten with water and set it to boil again while I went for the horses and snubbed them to the tie rings at the back of the trailer. Then I removed the pan and the grill from the fire, threw on a pile of wood, and got inside the sleeping bag on my back with the .41 magnum hog-leg by my head. Above, the pine boughs were underlit by the leaping fire that showed the grasses rippling as far as the edge of the circle of light, and presently the moon, just past the full, rose, across the valley from the glow that still outlined the western mountains. Beyond the circumference of its radius the Perscids sparked and disappeared. Wrapped in the bag, from the verge of sleep I thought I felt the ground move, but it was only the horses stamping on their shortened leads.

At dawn I built up the fire for coffee and let the horses graze while I broke camp and reloaded the horse pack; since we would be following water up to the pass it was not necessary to take them to drink at the creek. I loaded them back into the trailer and followed the floodplain of South Piney Creek as far as I felt sure of backing the rig around. The horses stood patiently in the hot sun while I saddled and loaded them, whisk-

ing horse flies with their tails until I sprayed them down with a strong repellent. The gelding carried the big pack, the bedroll tied into the saddle strings ahead of the pommel, and myself; the mare had only the water canteens and the day pack with the medical kit over the horn. We rode out half an hour later at a slow trot, ponying the mare on a lead I held with my gloved hand.

It was cooler in the forest though still warm, and at the first water we came to the horses refused a drink. But they drank at the next crossing, where we turned north and began the climb diagonally across the east slope of Mount Darby above the North Fork of South Piny Creek. Across the steep canyon the parks showed brilliant green and along the trail the columbine was still in bloom, though the lupin was fading. I sat relaxed in the saddle, letting my hips sway with the movement of the horse and hearing the hollowish thud of hooves on the trail, interrupted occasionally by the mare scrambling behind us to keep up. Through the screen of the trees I caught a glimpse of a great bird, most likely an eagle, sweeping down canyon on leveled wings. Where the trail steepened and swung left against the watershed we climbed above the lodgepole forests and ascended among the huge limber pines beginning at around 9,600 feet, wide-spaced monsters with trunks several feet in diameter admitting a hazy sunshine that slanted between them and glowed in the thin grass growing from the forest floor. We broke into the first of the highest parks enclosed by curving battlements of pink rock and rode on along the base of the cliff until we came to a partial amphitheater resembling half a volcanic crater with a forested cone rising at the center. Patches of snow remained on the talused walls below a four-point bull elk and four cows who watched from the escarpment 700 feet above as we ascended the cone to make camp within the white-bark pine scrub that covered it. The moment I dismounted they turned and dropped behind the crest of the ridge.

My fire ring after four years was undisturbed in the shade of a white-bark pine curving outward in five separate trunks from the base. I unloaded the horses beside it and picketed them before I spread the groundcloth on the grassy slope amid tiny alpine grasshoppers jumping in the warm sun, and erected the tent above it. By walking a few steps away from camp I could look down Fish Creek drainage to

the Green River Basin, and across the plain to the Wind River Range 80 or 90 miles to the east. I placed one of the saddles over a low branch, spread the blankets to dry in the sun, and set the other saddle upright on the pommel. While the horses grazed I sat propped against the saddle tree, surrounded by lupin, blue forget-me-nots, cinquefoil, and the large fleshy green gentians, reading the English explorer Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*, an account of his travels by camelback in the Empty Quarter of southern Arabia in the late 1940's. When my friend Steve Bodio of New Mexico recently proposed to his publisher that he write a book about falconers in Mongolia, the editor patiently explained to him that travel books are "passé." Perhaps she was right, since the literature of travel is in some ways the richest in the Western literary tradition for its devotion to reality, something in which the modern reading public has scant interest. Indeed, travel itself is passé. For Thesiger, a heroic man and a fine writer, now 85 years of age, his explorations were personal ventures. Of the Empty Quarter he says, "I went there to find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert peoples." Despising machines and the Western concept of progress, feeling himself an exile during his stays in England, he nevertheless appreciated the danger of falling between two worlds, alienated from his own people while remaining unable ever to become one of the Bedu or the Abyssinians whose way of life he so admires. While the camp robbers squawked and flew down to peck at the pack stretched on the ground, I read the poignant description of his encounter at the well at Manwakh with a lovely Arab girl wearing her hair in braids over her shoulders and a blue tunic open at the neck to expose her breasts. "She was very fair," Thesiger says. Condemned by the life of his choice to bachelorhood, elsewhere in his work he appears uninterested in female companionship. Putting aside his book, I went with a pan to scoop snow from a compacting drift for my solitary evening toddy.

I did not make use of the tent but slept again under the stars after watching the moon come up and whiten the surrounding cliffs. We were on our way by ten the next morning over Cheese Pass. The trail, which from a distance appears to be slipping off the cliff face, in reality is secure enough: I led the mare on foot

and let the gelding, who does not lead so well on the steeps, follow us. We reached the saddle, elevation 10,440, after a climb of 660 vertical feet. I mounted the gelding, took the mare in hand again, and followed the switchbacks down the more gentle, wooded western aspect of the ridge. Near the bottom we found a spring rising among moss and elephant head, where I dismounted to fill the canteens before riding north, downhill into the forested hole where the East Fork of the Greys River heads. The climb out of the bottom was steep enough that I was forced to get down and lead once more, but when I mounted again we were traversing the great alpine meadow tilting west toward the Greys River Valley. We climbed on the diagonal across thin grass growing over fresh elk droppings and fractured shale on which the winded horses stumbled occasionally. I paused long enough to let them blow before ascending a red pulverizing knob above a snow cornice marked 10,460 on the topographic map. The knowledge of what lies beyond this knob is never sufficient to lessen the impact of the view, as Bald Mountain and Wyoming Peak come suddenly into sight, their twin peaks rising from massive pedestals in huge red triangles streaked with snow against an ultraviolet sky. I rode on across the meadow feeling the horse tipped sideways by the terrific wind, until we reached a reading of 10,920 on the map. Here I dismounted and let the horses crop the grass while, standing amid alpine forget-me-not, pipestemmon, larkspur, Indian paintbrush, blue flax, and eruptions of purple lupin, I gazed about a horizon extending 360 degrees. Beneath my feet Middle Piny Lake lay inset in a furrow of rock 2,000 feet below. Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado; Wasatch, Gros Ventres, Wind River, and Uinta Mountains; the Salt River Range. "Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the stretch of the valley of Jericho, city of palm trees, as far as Zoar." There is solitude, even loneliness, in the wilderness. But only from wilderness do you ever gain a view of the promised land. I stood for several minutes feeling the sun burn my face and the hard wind chafe it. Then I remounted and started back the way we had come. From this place, there was nowhere to go but down.

c

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CONTINUITY A JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Published by the Young America's Foundation

NUMBER NINETEEN

SPRING 1995

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