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# The Hundredth Meridian

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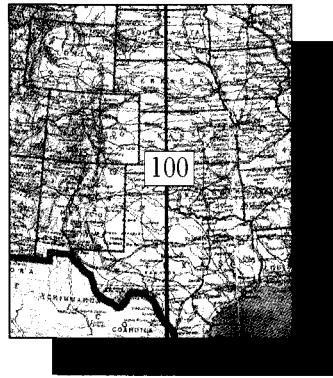
by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## The Seventh Day

The first thing you notice is the heat and the intensity of the light, glaring on the white-painted adobe walls of Mesilla where Indian rugs, sun-rotted and sun-faded, hang behind deeply recessed windows barred with iron. Stepping out from the coolness of San Albino on the plaza after Mass into the blinding Sunday noon had a final quality, like dying suddenly and seeing God face-to-face. The tourists outside the church watched from a safe distance as the congregation emerged, as if we were extras in an historical recreation or a multicultural pageant. Even with the tourists, the silence at noon was nearly as striking as the stillness, and the heat. Across the plaza the barman at the Double Eagle drew the first glass of beer beneath the polished wood and glass overhang of the massive backbar, brought all the way from Chicago where it was once a fixture in the Hotel Drake.

In Doña Ana the air had a perceptible bite from acres of ripening chili peppers. I found the horses shaded up in their stalls; they emerged reluctantly at my call, extending only their heads and necks beyond the adobe wall. Out on Redland Drive the neighbors' horses whinnied from the orchard at the end of the road; roosters crowed; somewhere a peacock screamed. In the backyard were catbirds, grackles, and a bobwhite quail. The catbirds softly cried, the grackles racketed, the quail bobwhited from the willow, fig, peach, and apricot trees. The house with its narrow windows shaded by the portal remains cavelike throughout most of the summer days.

It faces east, giving a view of the Organ Mountains thrusting from the desert floor through deltoid upsweeps of grass, pancake pear, mesquite, and yucca. The mountains change, almost from one minute to the next, with alteration in the light produced by the traveling sun, and by atmospheric humidity. Change is registered in color, in density, in texture, and in perceived depth, the range progressing daily from the single dimension of a theatrical backdrop through the second and third dimensions until, around



sunset, it achieves the mystical qualities of a fourth—fleetingly, aided by the moist opacity of the evening light. Because it is humid in the south-central deserts of New Mexico in August, which is the monsoon season here.

At dawn the mountain peaks are obscured by cloud, the pediments shrouded in a bright white mist. By mid-morning the clouds have lifted away from the mountains and vanished, the sky is blue overhead and very hot, and the horizon distant and clear. Near three o'clock or sooner, if sufficient moisture is being borne in the atmosphere, early thunderheads are building in the west. Other days storms amass above the eastern mountains and spread westward, a phenomenon I have never witnessed in Utah and Wyoming. They are discrete, sharply defined systems of chaos in an elsewhere serene field of blue sky saturated with sunlight, preceded by violent winds and blinding clouds of red dust soon beaten down and muddled by the advancing rain, and producing fiery displays of corded, muscular lightning, baseball-sized hail, and flash floods. Unlike summer storms in the north, the monsoons do not clear the air but leave it heavy and still at evening, impregnated with moisture that persists through the night. Monsoons ordinarily are a daily summertime occurrence in the upper Sonoran desert where they operate like clockwork, but this year Arizona has experienced drought, while New Mexico's own hit-or-miss system has been mostly hit.

America is the promised land for automobiles, not people. This is true especially of American cities, and Las Cruces, New Mexico, is home to some

70,000 human inhabitants now, not counting the vehicular population. In America, cars stable their humans in humble sheds painted brightly and decorated with flowers and trees, as people once maintained the horses that were the Neanderthal automobiles. Contrary to what James Burnham thought, cars are the new American elite to which even the bureaucratic and managerial class defers, as evidenced by the time and attention it devotes to creating a more abundant life for its automotive masters. For someone who has spent the last 20 years in an isolated community of a couple of thousand people, and whose only previous urban experience is of New York City (the automobile equivalent of feudal Europe), moving to a city built to automotive specifications and architecturally designed to suit the aesthetic tastes of automobiles is a shock. So far as the American city of today is unlivable, the automobile—not gangs, or even ethnic politicians—is the chief culprit.

To escape the city and the traffic, hoping to find a trail into the Robledo Mountains, I took the highway north, up the valley of the Rio Grande from Las Cruces to Hatch, an agricultural town that calls itself the Chili Capital of the World and feels as much like Old as it does New Mexico. Following a channel cutting down through tilted strata of weathering rock, the gray-green river pushes along past grassy bottoms and mesquite thickets, vernal fresh and green from the recent rains. Several miles south of Hatch the Border Patrol had set its orange cones out, diverting northbound traffic toward the checkpoint where the Mexican-American officer on duty looked into the bed of the pickup and inquired, in a heavily accented voice, if I were an American citizen. It occurred to me to recount for him the anecdote in which the Duke of Wellington, when asked if he is Mr. Smith, replies, "My good man, if you can believe that, you can believe anything." But the application was elliptical or inverted, and the Border Patrol deserves our support and respect. In Hatch this Sunday morning a chili shop sold *ristras* and T-shirts to the tourists, while outside the church the local congregation stood con-

versing after Mass, the men uniformly shaded by their wide straw hats.

Abandoning the search for a way up to the Robledos, I returned to town and drove out on Highway 70 toward San Augustin Pass, in the Organ Mountains. East of the pass the country changes dramatically with the wide valley stretching north and south between the Organs and the Sacramento Mountains. The greater part of the valley is occupied by the White Sands Missile Range, closed away from the public behind locked gates posted with signs reading AVISO, WARNING, NO PHOTOGRAPHS (the self-importance, combined with the paranoia, of the United States government). When viewed from the east the Organs appear almost as a different range, curving concavely away from the green valley heavily shadowed this afternoon by storm clouds lifting above the Sacramentos. The Trinity Site, open to the public, lies at the north end of the missile range; eastward, beyond the mountains, is the city of Roswell, currently celebrating a half-century of notoriety. What happened in Roswell 50 years ago—what actually was discovered there—is more of a mystery than sophisticated people wish to think. Strange things have been seen in New Mexico, and continue to be seen. Returning from Albuquerque to Belen some years ago, Jim Rauen observed an unfamiliar contrail across the midafternoon sky: a single vapor trail interrupted at intervals by a sequence of spaces occupied by a pair of vapor dots set side by side. He later described what he had seen to an engineer of his acquaintance, who explained that the trail could have been

produced only by a pulse engine. Jim was satisfied, until the man added that the pulse engine, existing only theoretically, had not been built yet. On another occasion Jim's sister Betty, visiting from Chicago, was setting up her telescope on the portal when she and her brother both saw a collection of lights above the Manzano Mountains, like stars doing a kind of celestial jig. The lights moved vertically and horizontally, up and down, backwards and sideways—always at terrific speed and with impossible changes of direction—until, drawing together suddenly, they all at once shot away toward the southwest, followed five minutes later by a flight of fighter planes from the Air Force Base in Albuquerque in hot pursuit. On his way out of the *bosque* along the Rio Grande, carrying his gun and the birds he had shot that evening, a goose hunter from Los Chavez observed the same lights. More recently, a neighbor of Jim's living on Tierra Grande and two friends were amazed to see a strange triangular craft pass overhead, so low—it seemed to them—that they watched breathless, expecting the plane to crash into the mountainside. Instead, it cleared the 10,000-foot summit easily and vanished from sight, causing them to revise their initial estimate of the craft's size, which must have been colossal. What does the federal government know? AVISO.

I recrossed the pass to the little town of Organ where I found a dirt road and followed as it skirted the mountains, heading south to Baylor Canyon. On the other side of a low rise something lay stretched on the gravel ahead. I stopped, and lifted a broom from the truck bed. The snake was two feet long and dusty-looking, torpid with the late afternoon heat. I prodded him delicately with the broom; he chose to ignore me. Taking up a handful of light pebbles I tossed them underhand at him; he put his tongue out, but otherwise failed to react. I prodded harder with the broom and was rewarded as the snake came alive all over, whipping sideways into a sinuous striking position and sounding his dry, small, deadly buzz. DON'T TREAD ON ME. You have to admire a rattlesnake; he has more gumption and courage than the average American citizen. He struck and struck again at the broom until I felt a little guilty: a mouthful of bristles is an unpleasant experience by anyone's standard. The rattler dodged sideways and slid under the

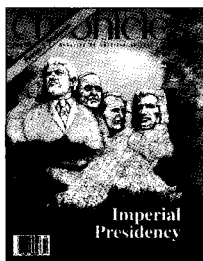
truck, where he assumed a defensive posture against the tire. Feeling like a boy who has tied a tin can to a dog's tail and repented of it, I chased him from under the tire between the wheels and watched him pile himself up in a circular pyramid, his black tongue flicking, his poison sacs bulging. I drove the truck ahead, and walked back for another look. Now he was coiled down inside himself, only the tip of his snout pointing above the thickness of the outer wrap. Assured that he would not be run over by the next passing vehicle I left him to relax, uncoil, and go in search of an early supper.

Leaving the truck canted in the borrow pit I walked off into the desert in the direction of the mountains, climbing up through lush desert foliage until, looking back, I could see the Rio Grande Trench far away and below and the city within it, spilling onto the mesa. I climbed slowly, admiring the light on the mountains and watching for snakes; preoccupied by the rock, earth, and cactus that drew my attention from the sky. Surprised by thunder I stopped climbing and faced about to the west and a bolus of cloud propelling itself upon the mountains, dazzling white in its upper reaches—sharp-edged against the blue sky—and a wrathful purple-black below, above the slanting rain. The storm came on rapidly, boiling higher into the sky and spreading farther over the desert, and as I ran I heard a voice cry, "Lord, it is good for me to be here!" I took cover between two boulders, close set enough for protection from the lightning but with space between them to observe the onslaught. The whirling dust advanced in a rush and was beaten down by the rain, the wind shrieked and hissed, lightning glared in sheets across black chaos, thunder crashed, and water torrented in the gullies and arroyos.

Soaked by the warm rain I kept my head down and my back against the rock until the storm had passed behind the mountain barrier, emerging after the lightning ceased and the wind had died into a transformed world of light and shadow, sky and cloud, penetrated by insubstantial rock spires and arced by a double rainbow. It seemed an infinitely high world, as if the mountains had been relocated, drawn up into another dimension of existence, and I was hardly surprised to discover, staring into the murk below, that neither the city nor the plain was visible from here at all.

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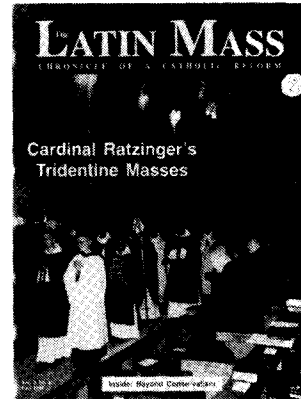
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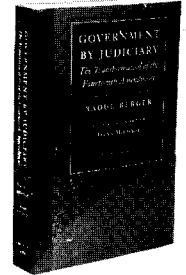
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