

• The Bookshelf •

CONDUCTED BY HENRY C. TRACY

AMERICAN FOLKWAYS

DESERT COUNTRY. By Edwin Corle.
New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 357 pp.
\$3

PIÑON COUNTRY. By Haniel Long.
Same. 327 pp. \$3

Four books each year in the new American Folkways series will explore differing regional aspects of the American scene. The first two, Edwin Corle's *Desert Country* and Haniel Long's *Piñon Country*, are successful both as literature and as a new approach to an understanding and appreciation of America.

Mr. Corle treats the desert as a friend, the possessor of secrets that all might profit by knowing, especially city-folk. The moods of this inscrutable blend of time-space, heat and sand, instead of shutting us out, become a liberating experience. For his task as interpreter, Mr. Corle has a rare gift: immediacy, no gap between his eye and pen; the planet becomes primal; we are brought down to the rudiments of existence, where we can feel *first* things as presumably Adam felt them.

Only then does Mr. Corle introduce living persons into this strange domain of supposed waste land. We watch their lives, loves, hopes, dreams, frustrations. At Havasu, the "Land of the Sky Blue Water," the Havasupai live an idyllic existence like that at Shangri-La. Among the Quharicas, we meet forgotten Indians, an off-shoot of the Uto-Aztecan nation, on the "Tobacco Road" of Arizona. And

we come to know the first and oldest families of America among the Hopi, whose settlement dates from 1200. All sorts and conditions of men . . . and the desert: a fascinating account of both.

Piñon Country surpasses fiction in conveying the realities of a region and its people. By a capital innovation, Haniel Long makes even his Table of Contents challenging. Interspersed with chapter-headings are terse paragraphs that induce lively interest. Thus: *Some people could move into the Southwest and live long lives without killing Indians or being killed by them.* And the quiet, dispassionate way in which Mr. Long deploys his facts and interprets them yields an uncommon satisfaction.

The chapter on the Pueblo Indians is one of the best. Unlike the hunting tribes, they built their life around the culture of maize. "Life is not good if you are never sure of your food." Maize gave the Pueblos that assurance, and a winter leisure to "feel safe, and think about making pottery and blankets, and tell stories, and sing songs, and make love, and play with the babies, and meditate on life, and improve your prayer-dances."

But perhaps the most urgent passages for U.S. Americans are those that deal with the Spanish Americans, whose culture, older than that of New England, was crowded to the wall by a shrewder, somewhat ruder type of settler who brought along lawyers and laws, which he manipulated to his advantage. "Democracy" was our great gift, in 1846, to New

Mexico. But democracy, as Haniel Long shows, cannot work of itself—it must be made to work. Much is implied in his statement, “The politician who thinks

of a way really to help the native people grow and find their rightful place in the American pattern will be New Mexico’s first statesman.”

AMERICA IS BECOMING

HOME IS HERE. By Sidney Meller. New York: The Macmillan Company. 405 pp. \$2.50

When Alano Dorelli finds congenial people and an old-country atmosphere on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, he ends his world-wandering as a migrant worker and builds a house to tempt his Lucia to bring their family of five from Lombardy and make it a home. He is certain that “Home is here.”

But not Lucia. Even after she has yielded and come the long way, lived there a year and more, and found friendly folk speaking Italian, the pull of the life on the old farm by Lake Como is still strong in her. Noise, dust, and danger from the quarry under the cliff shake the house and her confidence. Threads of attachment will not knit. In the end, however, the menace of that quarry operating unjustly to destroy the peace of the whole neighborhood spurs her to learn English, that she may claim her rights as an American—rights that had so far seemed mere words.

So it is in Lucia’s mind and spirit that the drama of this finely-wrought book emerges and moves toward a climax—a spirit often weak and fluctuating, a mind often foolish but essentially sound. It is her night school teacher, a bit stilted but wise, who tells her that “America is becoming.”

No author has better told the inside story of neighborhood groups of new Americans from Lombardy, Genoa, Sicily,

Grenada, with some Irish and Yankee stock intermingled, sinking differences in the American way. The interest is cumulative; the tempo never lags. Humor, pathos, apt dialogue, and sound analysis of human feeling make this a top-ranking novel and our choice for the best fiction on a new American theme.

Among other recent works of fiction exploring the diversity of peoples that have lent flavor to the American scene is *Instead of the Thorn* by Bastian Kruithof (Half Moon Press, \$1.50), a portrayal of pioneer life and characters in the Dutch community that became Holland, Michigan. Homely virtues, helpful neighbors, a village fanatic; struggle, success—these make a memorable work of fiction and a fine tribute to the folk from Holland. On a wider canvas is I. J. Kapstein’s *Something of a Hero* (Knopf, \$2.75). Its large cast of characters is drawn from families of Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, Negro, and Armenian origin, involved in social troubles incident to the rise of industrialism in an American town, subject to pressures that bring out the best in some, the worst in others. Arthur Kober’s *My Dear Bella* (Random, \$2) features English which has been shattered and remolded to the heart’s desire—that heart whose abode is the Bronx in New York. Bella’s parents are adepts in the dialect popularized by Milt Gross. Not merely a book of humor, this fiction interprets the Jewish American scene while it