

Myths of the West

BY CAREY MCWILLIAMS

FOR centuries the Far West was the Dark Continent of America. Myths arose from this unknown and fabulous region beyond the Alleghanies like mists from the sea. It was reported to be a legendary land of uncharted rivers, delectable mountains, valleys of rich promise, and magical fountains bubbling with the waters of eternal youth. To the north was a mysterious passage to the Orient, while the buried treasures of the Spanish and the jewels of the Indians were hidden in the south. The exploration of the Far West was, indeed, prompted by the handsome fabrications of the natives working on the gullibility and avarice of the Spanish. Coronado traversed an empire in his fruitless search for the Seven Cities of Cibola. No sooner were the boundaries of the region established and its topography verified, than the heroes of its conquest passed into the realm of mythology. Through its mountain valleys and across its interminable plains stalked the tall figures of Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Marcus Whitman, Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, Jim Bridger, and John Sutter.

Carried East by excited tongues, these legends were greatly embroidered in the telling. The existence of an oral epic of the West is demon-

strated by the amazing collection of books and pamphlets that serves today as a monument to the westward movement. It was the unknown and unpredictable character of the land that fostered the Myth. The East was diligently suckled on fabulous Government reports, the swollen and embellished narratives of mendacious travelers, and the pamphlets of such saga writers as Hall J. Kelley, James O. Pattie, and John B. Wyeth. These men pictured the Far West in hues of the rainbow and the peacock. A sizable bibliography could be made up alone of books on *Life in the Far West*. These pretentious pseudo-histories invariably contained chapters devoted to such marvelous exploits as "Shooting the Rapids," "An Encounter with a Grizzly in the Rockies," "A Battle with the Indians," "A Tough Tussle with a Panther," and "The War Dance of the Comanches." The Far West was not always glowingly depicted; in fact, just the converse was often the case. The school geographies of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties, pictured the land west of the Missouri as the American Sahara; even Government engineers were deceived by the paucity of rainfall into fostering the legend of the West's aridity. But whether deceived by under-

statement or extravagant fanfares, the East was inundated for decades by tides of frontier publicity.

Once the East was thoroughly aroused by these gorgeous accounts of a boundless region beyond the Alleghanies, the Far West became the goal of a nation's vaulting ambition. The westward movement that ensued was, in the words of Dr. Paxson, "the strongest single factor in American history." It was a profoundly moving experience. Contemporary records contain vivid accounts of the excitement created in the East by news of the discovery of gold in California. If there had been a few dissenting ravens, full of dire predictions about the Far West, they were swept aside by the reports of this momentous discovery. The westward rush of fancy and elation which followed swept aside even the conservative enthusiasm of men like Senator Benton, who had fixed the "western limit of this republic" with the Rockies, "where the statue of the fabled god Terminus should be raised upon its highest peak, never to be thrown down."

Nor did the myth-making which arose in reponse to this overpowering enthusiasm cease with the final extension of the frontier to the Pacific. It persisted throughout the Nineteenth Century and shows no signs of abating today. Not a year has passed since 1900 in which the West has escaped rediscovery. The legend, quickly soaring into the realm of myth, has been retold year after year. The persistence of the process of rediscovery can be illustrated variously. A few references will have to suffice.

Compare C. F. Lummis' *A Tramp*

Across the Continent (1884) with *The Better Country* (1928) by Dallas Lore Sharp. The vitality of the Western Myth is at once apparent; both writers were obviously nurtured on this saga of the West written by many hands and told by a thousand tongues. Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer discovered "the amazing West" for the first time in 1922. Similar testimonials have been recorded by Katherine Fullerton Gerould and Alfred Knopf. In 1931 the West is still "strange" and "new." Easterners are amazed, so they say, to find street cars and golf courses in the Rockies.

II

THE South and Middle West were settled and established before the Far West was thoroughly explored. Not only were these regions settled, but they occupied quite definite niches in the national gallery before the West emerged from its nebulous frontier existence; so that the West, coming into self-consciousness, found that it had a difficult problem to solve. How was it to dispose of the outlandish Myth about its origins, attributes, and identity? It was necessary, obviously, either to accept the legend or to repudiate it harshly and irrevocably. With childlike ingenuousness, the West not only accepted the legend, but naïvely built it out to epic proportions. To the mythological figures of the pre-settlement period, it added the Cowboy, the Miner, the Engineer, the Homesteader, and the Tramp. It avidly seized upon the last vestiges of its romantic origins for profitable preservation and established traditions which flourish in the Pendleton and Cheyenne Rodeos, and the

California Fiestas, of today. There is scarcely a Western town on the map that does not have its annual Wild West celebration. The West sent Buffalo Bill's show around the world that the legend might be fostered in new fields and it continues to dress its delegates to American Legion conventions in the traditional garb of the cowboy.

But, on other levels, disquiet arose. It began to be bruited about that the Wild West legend had a tendency to frighten Eastern capitalists. The rumors of wide open towns, hilarious mining camps, bloody gun fights, gangs of desperadoes, and politically corrupt States ruled by bosses, had spread to the East. It became, therefore, a problem of making the Wild West legend genteel while preserving its picturesque qualities — a task which presented no insuperable difficulties to Western myth-making propensities. While the booster movement was yet nascent, talented publicists began to transmute the Western legend to a higher plane.

Throughout the early years of the century, the files were replete with articles about *The Culture of the West* (1905), *The West's Higher Life* (1900) and a positive rash of articles on *The Spirit of the West*. Dr. Henry Loomis Nelson assured the East in 1904 that there was "no wool in the Western mind, and there is no decadence in the Western conscience." Charles Moreau Harger, editor of the Abilene *Daily Reflector*, labored unceasingly throughout the early years of the century in presenting "The West's Higher Life."

It was during this period, spoken of by the publicists as "the era of

moral reintegration," that the legend of the West's political progressiveness was born. It became part of the mental dualism of Westerners to send a "radical" representative to Washington who could blow great oratorical soap bubbles about "the spirit of the Western progressive movement." The Honorable Franklin K. Lane, regarded as a typical young Lochinvar bent on the redemption of the decadent East, lectured at the University of Virginia in 1912 and unctuously extolled the West as the region from which great political tidings might be expected. And so today Idaho retains Senator Borah to foster the legend. Senators Johnson, Cutting, Costigan, and Wheeler are products of this same Western political sophistry. The great progressive ballyhoo of the West is merely an echo of the stentorian outcry of a statesman of 1830 who declared during a debate: "Sir, it is not the increase of population in the West which this gentleman ought to fear, it is the energy which the mountain breeze and Western habits impart to those emigrants. They are regenerated, politically I mean, sir."

III

WHILE the Myth was being precipitated in the fancies of the early pamphleteers, it was quite common to find the region beyond the Alleghanies designated as the West. But "West" in the popular imagination soon began to assume a symbolic connotation: it came to mean frontier. And so the West retreated to the Rockies as the Middle West crowded the frontier westward. When the Sierra Nevadas were crossed and California admitted in

1849, the tide of expansion began to roll back upon itself. As the frontier disappeared like a mirage on the desert and the mist of early speculation and fancy cleared, it was soon discovered that there were many Wests within the West. Even the most enthusiastic Westerners conceded the existence of these inner-regions. In fact the first act of the Far West on becoming self-conscious was to repudiate the legend of its inclusiveness. Since 1849 writers on the West have excluded California by instinct and popular demand. It was not long before the Southwest and the Northwest broke away like islands in midstream. These regions were not only markedly dissimilar climatically and topographically: they possessed different traditions and mythologies.

And with this process of secession well under way, the search for the "real West" has been unremitting. Mr. Bernard De Voto carefully excludes the Coast and the Southwest and limits the region to the "Inter-mountain West" by which he means Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, with the eastern fringe of Washington and Oregon. Mr. Struthers Burt believes that "New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana are out-and-out Far Western States; western Texas, western Nebraska, a thin slice of the Dakotas, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and eastern California are also Far Western," while Mr. Burges Johnson claims to have located the heart of the region in the Sangre De Cristo Range in southern Colorado.

But the legend could not be so easily dislodged. The geographical

boundaries of the Far West, based on State lines, have always been hard to draw; hence the notion got abroad that ethical, rather than geographical considerations, marked the kingdom of the West. By the use of this fiction it was possible to keep the boundaries of the West elastic and the mists of legend could still breed in the dark. And so it was suggested that the West was a matter of mood and manner. Cheyenne, for instance, was "spiritually West" while North Platte belonged to the Middle West. Wherever one found informality, unconventionality, a firm handclasp, an open door, a breezy rhetoric, an unrestrained manner, there was the West. This idea is, of course, merely a survival of the early legend. It dates from the establishment of a neo-Western school of writing by Bret Harte. The Wild West romance which survives today owes its origin to the genius of Bret Harte.

Harte, however, depicted a pioneer mood as evanescent as a Western sunset. Lord Curzon attempted some years ago to define the qualities of all pioneer communities. If his comparative frontier method is adopted, it is apparent that what Harte had to say of California could have been said of Australia, the Veldt, or Alaska. It is probably quite true that when culture moves, it changes; it may also be conceded that the "subliminal influences" of the land mold thought and character. But to define region from character, rather than character from region, is a dangerous expedient. What qualities were Western?

This problem has been earnestly debated since 1900. To Dr. Foster the spirit of the West signifies commu-

nity spirit, youthful zest, a braggadocio manner, and a certain spiritual resilience. Mr. Arthur Chapman, who wrote *Out Where the West Begins*, thinks that the West connotes "eternal youth and an atmosphere of hope." Mr. Burges Johnson thought of the West as "a realm spiritual as well as physical. Indians in war-paint had been there recently, cowboys and horses must be there still, with vast open spaces of mountain or plain; also the primitive virtues must obtrude themselves, standing out in high relief, like morals in old-fashioned Sunday-school books; and, above all, a certain indefinable informality must exist, legal, political, social, with a lack of self-consciousness about it." Mr. Harger preached that "the new Westerner is another type, the clear-headed, stout-hearted, frank-faced man of the plains; the product of years of trial, of experiment, of triumph. He trusts not in luck, but in sense and system; he builds not for a day but for decades; he is manifest on the distant reaches of the 'short-grass country'; he is the rustler of the prairie villages; he walks the pavements of progressive cities; he believes in colleges as well as in corner lots; he asks sanity and high ideals in the plans for the growth of the West."

In cold fact it would be quite possible to demonstrate that a great deal of Western spirit, so-called, has been made up of mimicry and imitation. Legend reacts on its subject. My father had no end of difficulty, as a pioneer cattleman in northwestern Colorado, in keeping his cowboys from playing the rôle of Cowboy. They spent long hours in the bunk-

house on dull days devouring cheap romances of the West and insisted on dressing and acting and talking like the characters in their favorite romances. Many of their "pranks" were, I am sure, of purely literary origin.

Mr. William R. Lighton attempted a much sturdier definition of the region we call the West. He summarized his West as follows: "This is an industrial nation. More than any other nation on earth it measures the motives of its every-day life by the industrial scale. If any part is able to show independence of other parts, it will be industrial independence. In this particular alone can the West be said to have a separate existence."

This suggestion finds strong support elsewhere in American regional consciousness. It constitutes the basis of the hegemony of the Middle West and the South. The West languishes today primarily because it is still an industrial dependency of the Middle West and the East. Until a comparatively recent period, the West was forced to look to other regions for the entire paraphernalia of existence. Household furniture, clothing, wagons, machinery, saddles, even such intangibles as capital and credit, were imported. The Western novelist, Mrs. Mary Hallock Foote, has observed that in her time "men went East for their education, accent, and their wives." And Dr. Paxson, the foremost exponent of the frontier doctrine, suggests that the West stood forth as a definite region when it began to accumulate surplus capital.

When the Intermountain West is examined from this point of view it does assume a recognizable char-

acter. Its agriculture, at least so far as methods are concerned, is indigenous. It is a region made up of desert and mountain and valley. Its aridity, together with its vast extent of mountain area, would alone be sufficient to characterize it as a region. Moreover its social problems, notably in the development of its fabulously wealthy resources, are common to the region. The cattle companies captured Nevada after 1861; Montana was merely the alter-ego of the Anaconda Copper Company until recent years; the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company ruled Colorado during its formative period; while in Idaho and Wyoming the Union Pacific played the villain. Western resources have been ruthlessly exploited by Eastern capital; it is only of comparatively late date that sensible development, with reference to local needs, has been evolved. The era of industrial buccaneering retarded the development of the West; in fact, stunted its growth to a very serious extent during the period when the West was supposed to be most progressive.

As the wealth of the region went East, it is not surprising that most of its arrows continue to point in that direction. Even today it is impossible for the West to function as a unit; a Western bloc, of any kind, would be unthinkable. There is practically no intellectual communication between Denver, Salt Lake City, Boise, and Cheyenne, and none between these cities and those of the Pacific Coast. Despite the enthusiasm of Westerners for their magnificent country, it remains a rather dismal and uncivilized region, threatened with the future of becoming a large National

Park devoted to the sickly needs of the tourist and the summer resident.

IV

ON JULY 12th, 1893, Professor Frederick Jackson Turner called attention to the fact that the Superintendent of the Census had announced that there was no more free land. The significance with which Professor Turner endowed this innocent statement was slow in making itself felt. But suddenly, with the swiftness of an apocryphal revelation, word went round the college campuses that there was "no more free land" and, as a corollary, that "the frontier has disappeared." From that moment to the present day funereal laments have arisen over the demise of the frontier. Historical writing on the West since 1900 has been given over to the composition of obsequies on the frontier. This dolorous mood has resulted in an enormous and incredible renaissance of the Western Myth. To the monumental record of the pioneer jamboree must now be added the post mortem on the frontier that has been going on since 1900. It has been, for the most part, a literature of rediscovery and, while one might condone the errors of original research, it is hard to forgive those elaborate and unnecessary obfuscations of the rediscoverer, who sits in a swivel chair and enjoys the vicarious thrill of being an imaginary frontiersman.

Out of this misty and mythological mood, first given popular currency by Emerson Hough, has been born the inordinate modern day enthusiasm for the frontier and the frontiersman. It is an amazing record. One

can only nibble at it piecemeal. It gives promise of exceeding in bulk the already hefty literature of Western Americana. The writing, academic and otherwise, on the Cowboy, as a gaudy species of the genus Frontiersman, would fill a library. If the first writing about the West was characterized by bombast and extravagant good will, and if the middle period began with a child-like pride in its roughness followed by timid gestures at gentility, then this modern movement may be described as a highly self-conscious discovery of the fact that one need no longer be ashamed of being born in a sod hut; nay, that having been born in such a habitation is a mark of peculiarly resplendent distinction. It represents, in a word, the belated triumph of the uncouth transmogrified in a more complex age as the quaint.

Mr. John Gould Fletcher has given this mood its final statement: it would be difficult to exceed his bathos. Writing a sort of free verse scenario, *The Passing of the West*, Mr. Fletcher, a native of Arkansas who has lived most of his life in London, wept crocodile tears over the invasion of the West by his ancestors, the white men. Let me quote from his dirge: "Passing, forever passing is the West! Passing is the wild free life of the desert, the open air, the chapparal, the boundless waste, the blue sky over all! Passing, departing, vanishing, not to be sung, not to be remembered, not to be known. The last great stretch of sunlight, of loneliness, of silence is forever gone." Mr. Fletcher might do well to visit the West sometime.

The persistent and outrageous theory that the West must be main-

tained as a great outdoor playground for Eastern tourists, that it should, against its wishes and the crying need of the land, remain bucolic that rapturous but ill-informed poets may write atrocious lyrics about its lost grandeurs which are unshakably upon the horizon, must cease. It is, I say, a land unto itself. Many of us who know it well think that it has elements of perdurable charm. But we can not, unlike the tourists, be transients. We must eat. Certain corollaries naturally follow hard upon this fact and it is idle to try to wave them aside.

V

IT HAS even been suggested by the enthusiastic modern day Myth-makers that there were three frontiers: the frontier of exploration and discovery; the frontier of commercial expansion; and the cultural frontier. Dr. John Carl Parish writes that: "The most obvious and inevitable conclusion is that there has been from the first in America a general diminution of cultural development along an east to west line." Elsewhere in the same article, Dr. Parish cites, as proof of his proposition that culture is moving westward, the development of a Middle Western school of writers, the cultural pretenses of Chicago, the number of symphony orchestras in the West, and the existence of such art colonies as Santa Fé, Laguna Beach, and Carmel-by-the-Sea.

This pleasant theory is a revival, in academic garb, of another of those persistent legends about the West. In 1823 an excited Mr. Bishop wrote of a future age "when the mouth of the Columbia, or the head waters

of the Missouri, shall be the seat of empire and the abodes of the arts and refinement, and London and Paris may be as Nineveh and Babylon are." While John Todd, D.D., wrote in *The Sunset Land* (1870):

You will see, now, why I look upon the Pacific slopes as so important. Our gold is there; our silver is there; commerce is making herself a great place there; multitudes are gathering there; free schools are there; colleges are being planted there; and a great future *must* be there.

Westerners have always adopted one or the other of these two styles: the rosy rhetoric of easy prophecy or the hortatory earnestness of the sincere soul. Culture was associated with New York and Europe; eventually it would move West and be theirs, ergo it *must* be theirs!

Such a theory ignores, of course, the fact that "culture," so-called, followed hard upon the frontier. "Literary" periodicals were issued in Cincinnati and Lexington a decade after the frontier had moved west. A poem by John Keats was published in an obscure Western journal before it appeared in England. San Francisco, shortly after '49, was a hive of journalism. It could boast of half a dozen magazines, among them *The Golden Era*, and *The Overland Monthly*. A better newspaper than *Alta California* has yet to be published west of the Mississippi. If the emigrants did not bring "culture" with them it was constantly on their heels. Dr. Ralph Leslie Rusk has exhumed lists of dramatic productions that penetrated the Middle West in frontier times; it never since has had such diverse entertainment. Didn't Oscar Wilde lecture on "Art and Industry" in a Leadville saloon?

That "culture" is synonymous with the "fine arts" has been the working philosophy of those "patrons of the arts" who have been such a blight on the development of the West. The story of imported culture has not been written, but it will make good reading. The extent of the investment in museums of art in the West is really incalculable. Throughout the region collections of Ceramics, Egyptian Mummies, Byzantine Mosaics, Persian Tapestries, and Chinese Swords mournfully decorate museums. Several Western fortunes have come back to the community from which they were taken in some such guise as a collection of Russian Icons. Quite recently a benevolent Los Angeles millionaire bought a collection of Chinese art for \$385,000 that, when inventoried by an expert, was appraised at \$20,000. The seller is now in San Quentin Prison but the collection has been given to the city. And, still more recently, a group of rich amateurs in the same city bought the Browning letters at a cost of about \$50,000. Yet this city can not support a journal of opinion and would probably not know what use to make of one should it miraculously appear. Nor is the art colony, another of Dr. Parish's illustrations, an impressive institution. Young artists adorned with berets and Indian bracelets studded with turquoise, leave their New Jersey, and South Dakota homes to sojourn at Santa Fé while cultivating their sensibilities, but this is merely part of the modern fad of literary circuit riding.

In their infatuation with the possibilities of the frontier doctrine as a subject for modern myths, the his-

torians have suggested that there is a fourth frontier — that of business efficiency. Dr. Archer Hulbert advances the theory in *Frontiers: The Genius of American Nationality* (1929) and suggests that "You may not be a Lion or an Owl or a Moose, but you are a Gila monster if you think that such pacts and pledges, such affirmations of high ethical principles, such promises of devotion to come clean and live and let live, as millions of service-club men make each week create no new ideals and influence for good no lives." The same authority has characterized Jesus Christ as the "greatest apostle of efficiency this world ever heard of."

Still other historians, determined to add one more layer of Myth to the legend of the West, have suggested that when the frontier disappeared to

the naked eye it seeped inward and survives today as a subjective force which tugs fiercely at our heart strings whenever we see a pair of chaps or an old stage coach. Dr. Robert E. Riegel in *America Moves West* (1930) advances the theory that it is "possible to view the westward movement as a search for mental and spiritual values as much as an endeavor to seek economic opportunity." He also hints that perhaps the frontier spirit survives today in the movie daring of Tom Mix and Douglas Fairbanks, that perhaps it hovers above and around all of us like a disembodied spirit murmuring strange incantations. In fact the influence of the frontier has been traced on every possible phase of American life, if an exception may be made of the influence of the frontier on American historians.



Mark

BY JOSEPHINE JOHNSON

A Story

ALMOST at five he wrenched himself up and walked carefully, listening to hear the fourth board screech and know then that the door was arm's length away. He could tell also by the treacherous spring air, warm and bounded oblong by the door shape. The hall air smelled of wood and shadows. He went up to the clock and felt its hands. The glass was broken so that it was easier to tell time between the hour strikings. Mark wondered if he had slept all the afternoon, his head flung forward and his hands along the chair arms. He might be asleep even now as his fingers traced the clock hands — there was no way of telling. How could he distinguish his thoughts from dreams any longer when he looked into darkness at all hours? One rose and walked also in dreams without seeing. Perhaps if any one came probing eyes into his window now they would see him still hunched there, his heaviness making the laths sag and stretch with pain. He wondered what he looked like in these days and touched curious hands over the strange land of his face. He could feel a soft wrinkledness that there was no remembrance of, and his hands no longer curved

inward when they slid below the hard bones of his cheek. He was afraid to shave himself too well and could feel the hair grown patched about his chin. Twice he traced the clock hands to be sure of their position and then stepped out beyond the door. The milk bucket he kept always on a bench outside. He could hear its hard rattle when the bench was struck with his knee. The edge was sharp and turned nerve fibres into isolated threads of fire, but Mark was pleased. Pain, at least, was a reality and he was not asleep. Sometimes in chopping wood, he struck down where the holding hand might be so as to feel the soft blood and the pain, and know he was awake.

He was glad she was gone. His life was like a rock upon her own, and trying to think how her face looked when she spoke to him was sick irritation. She would say, "How are you, Mark?" and he could tell nothing from the words. He would lean forward and strain to hear whether she was glad or not. It was as though he listened for the sound of her mouth turning upward. There was remembrance of the dents along her cheeks, creased and smiling, and the half shut eyes — but how could