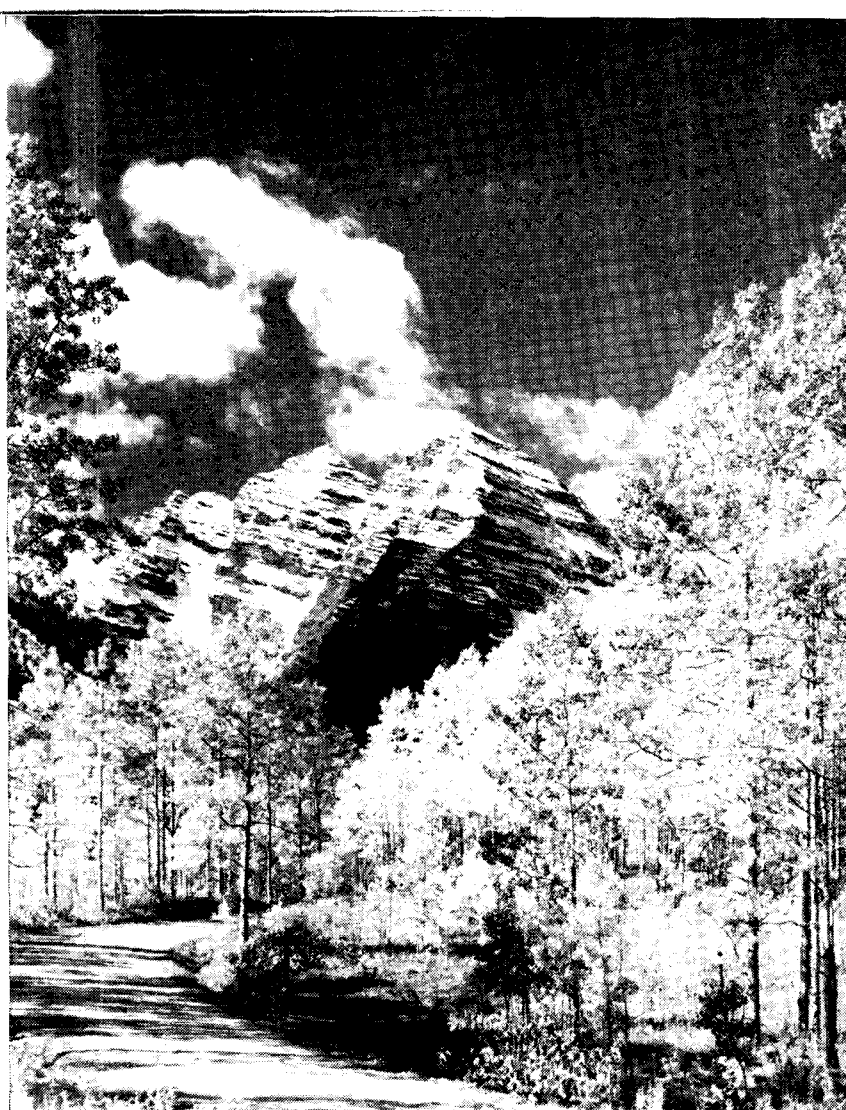


# WHY THE ASPENS QUAKE

by Eric Sevareid



*Berko, Pix.*

In the cool of Colorado—"if the West is gone we will become a different, a diminished people."

ASPEN, COLORADO.

**T**HE ROAD around Red Mountain to the trout stretches in Hunter Creek is "jeepable," as the Army's maps in the last war defined such pathways—jeepable and barely that. Robert Anderson, the New Mexico rancher and banker, who is easy and authentic in blue jeans and Stetson, had the bucking jeep under control. But it was rough on the rib joints, and that engaging young lady, Mrs. Ethel Kennedy, probably spoke the natural sentiment of a New Frontierswoman when she gasped from her precarious perch in the back, "Don't you think the government ought to come in here and make a good road?"

Instantly and instinctively, both Anderson and I said, "No!"

Improve that road and that's the end of the trout fishing in Hunter Creek, the end of one more secret joy in life, of one more dream for the winter nights in the Eastern cities, the finish of one more jeweled valley where the mule deer come out to drink and the ruffed grouse make the hollow logs boom in the mornings of spring. Maybe it will soon be finished, anyway; a private combine from the West Coast is trying to buy it up and raze the aspen and the pine for rows of little houses. This is happening in the high, narrow valleys all through the Rockies, our last

frontier of serenity and space, the ultimate Holy Grail, the spirit of the West. The Rockies will be its burial place unless we learn, as the English have learned, that "progress" has to be defined to mean preserving and cherishing as well as changing and "improving," and I hope I'm dead and buried, too, when the West is gone.

I mean it. A form of madness comes over me when I think of what is happening to the Great American West and what can happen. The Bob Andersons and the Stewart Udalls are my heroes these days and to hell with all the would-be Zeckendorfs, now building all over the West. If the laws won't stop this or regulate it with implacable severity, I'm for anarchy and vigilantism and would happily go to jail with those entirely respectable citizens of Aspen who obey a higher law and have been known to sneak out of their picture-window houses at night and saw down billboards.

(This is what those desperate Easterners, the cottagers on Fire Island, are going to have to do, mark my words. They are going to have to lie down in front of Robert Moses's bulldozers when

he starts that doubly damnable double highway the length and breadth of that precious, irreplaceable sandspit. But I won't join them; no man should join them. Moses would run right over the men. There is a chance he might stop short of sobbing women and little children, down on their knees in the sand.)

What is the American West, after all? It is space; and if the spaciousness goes, the West is gone and something is gone out of America, out of the American tradition and dream, out of our "image" of ourselves that can never come again. We will become, I swear, a different people, a diminished people.

I know I will be told by return mail that there is no such thing as the "spirit of the West," that Westerners are just as bad and good, as unhappy and happy, as lazy and energetic, as selfish and generous as Americans in the Bronx or Boston and no more or less than Americans in Boston or the Bronx. I've been told this before, by experts, by historians and sociologists and psychologists, and they don't know what they're talking about. They almost know, but not quite.

They know all about comparable

rates, West and East, of mental illness, crime, divorce, alcoholism, and general human faults and flaws. I make no counterclaims. They can take apart Professor Turner's famous history lecture of 1893 and make a strong argument that the development of the free lands did not breed any noticeably rugged independence of character in Westerners, who bullyragged Uncle Sam for more handouts and privileges in one form or another from the Homestead Act on.

They make a case, all right, but if they had seen what I saw in my childhood — years and years of Dakota farmers fighting drought and locusts and dust storms and blizzards with damn little immediate help from anybody but neighbors, just to hang on to those free land gifts and improve them—maybe they would debunk a little more cautiously. I don't claim it was tougher than growing up among the pushcarts of the Lower East Side of New York, but it was different, and in that difference lies the whole point about the West and what it means to those who know it and why their feeling about it in their bones is not false or phony.

You grew up in the West with a sense of change, of growth and improvement that even a kid could see and feel all the time. You had a sense of anticipation, of freshness, as your town developed, as the new gravel road connected your town with the nearest city, as the new bank went up, the little college began upstairs in the Opera House, the new shipment of books arrived for the town library in the back room of the bank. The future seemed as wide as the horizon. Maybe a youngster growing up in an old New England town or in the Old South had similar sensations, but I just don't believe they could have been quite the same.

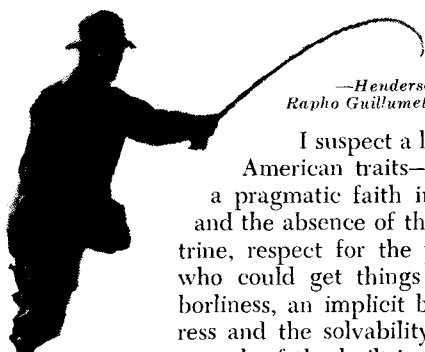
Turner, as I recollect him, had the theory that the West of the moving frontier was the "typical America" and that America couldn't be understood unless the West was understood. I would be wary of designating any part of this immense and varied country as typical, and surely a New Englander or a Southerner must resent this notion about the West. America is the sum of its parts, at the least reckoning.

But the Western communities grew in a way those in the Atlantic states didn't grow, or hadn't grown for so many generations as not to count for our time. It always seemed to me that Turner was right when he described each frontier community developing

from scratch, from birch bark canoe and moccasin or from sod hut and hand plow. That's the way it happened in my town from the time when August Peterson, I think it was, walked overland from the Devil's Lake region and built his shack among the oaks in our little river valley. No prefab shipment of European or Eastern culture, institutions and amenities could be brought or sent for. It all came later, bit by bit, and so a Westerner grew up as his own culture grew up. I just don't see how anybody growing to manhood in an old and settled community, whether in the American East or in Europe, just inheriting what others had created long before, can have the same sensations of participation, the same keen sense of shortcomings, but also the same keen sense of accomplishment and pride. In the West, you grew up not only with an electric feeling about the future, but a sober sense of the past, because both

past and future seemed so close at hand.

—Henderson, close at hand.  
Rapho Guilleumette.



I suspect a lot of "typical" American traits—inventiveness, a pragmatic faith in what works and the absence of theory and doctrine, respect for the practical man who could get things done, neighborliness, an implicit belief in progress and the solvability of problems —much of the built-in nature of our people that foreigners, at least, regard as "typically American," must have come out of that whole process, and unless I am blindly prejudiced, I still feel this spirit the moment I get back to the region of the mountains and the great plains.

I know it's changing, but then it has always been changing. Turner described three distinct evolutions—the drifting squatter who grew a few necessities, then drifted on; the good farmer who put in roads and fences and permanent buildings; then the developer who brought in railroads and industries and parks. You see the third stage in operation now, everywhere in the West, with the developers adding mass housing or buying up the good but small farms and ranches for amalgamation and corporate operation. Those eighteen separate farms that immediately surrounded my small town in North Dakota are now six separate farms. In the mountains, uncounted numbers of Hunter Creek valleys with their cluster of one-family ranch houses are going to housing developments or resorts or corporate farming.

The spaciousness of the West will remain, in mountains or plains, as seen from a plane or a peak, but will it feel

spacious when you're on the ground? It isn't any pressure of sheer population that is changing the West this side of the Pacific Coast because, actually, most of the essentially rural counties are losing population to the already big cities. It's the pressure for different *uses* of the space that can make it harder and harder for Americans to enjoy the space. Federal legislation can't save it all, and the efforts of Aspen citizens to encourage, by tax-deductible trust arrangements, the withholding of valley land for camp sites and fishing and hunting grounds, ought to be a pattern for a thousand potential Shangri-las in the Great West.

Space is the key to it all; I think most Americans are slowly suffocating for want of space whether they're aware of it or not. Our genes haven't had time to adjust to the neat, tidy, orderly little life of a Britain or a Denmark; millions of us just don't thrive, in our spirits or in our flesh, in the big city. There is a craving in us for space, and the big boom in boating, in hunting and fishing proves our quiet desperation.

I stroll along the half-empty, dusty streets of Aspen, as I could stroll through any small Western town, and I feel different. I feel the way I used to feel. The man strolling toward me is different. I can *see* him, his clothes, his gait, his whole nature, and he can see me. If I slow down, he will slow down; he'll know I want to talk and he will want to talk. You think it's just leisure that does this, the absence of pressures on a couple of fellows enjoying their annual vacations? It's that, but it's more than that—it's space. I'm sure that space is more important to the well-being of the human creature than leisure. In ten years, maybe, Aspen's summer population will be tripled; the streets will be crowded, and we'll walk and stop walking when and where the signs say we can. Then all will be changed; I won't see that man anymore and he won't see me, and we certainly won't stop and talk, unless we bump each other, in which case we'll exchange a few nasty remarks.

You think empty space diminishes the individual, makes him feel lost and little? Any individual who feels that way in the mountains or on the prairies has felt lost and little all his life. It's crowds and close quarters that make most of us feel lost and little; you can't increase the density of human beings without increasing the individual sense of anonymity, in a street, an apartment house, or an organization.

I'm a displaced person, and a sentimental fool perhaps, but I have a notion that I have a lot of company in  
(Continued on page 94)





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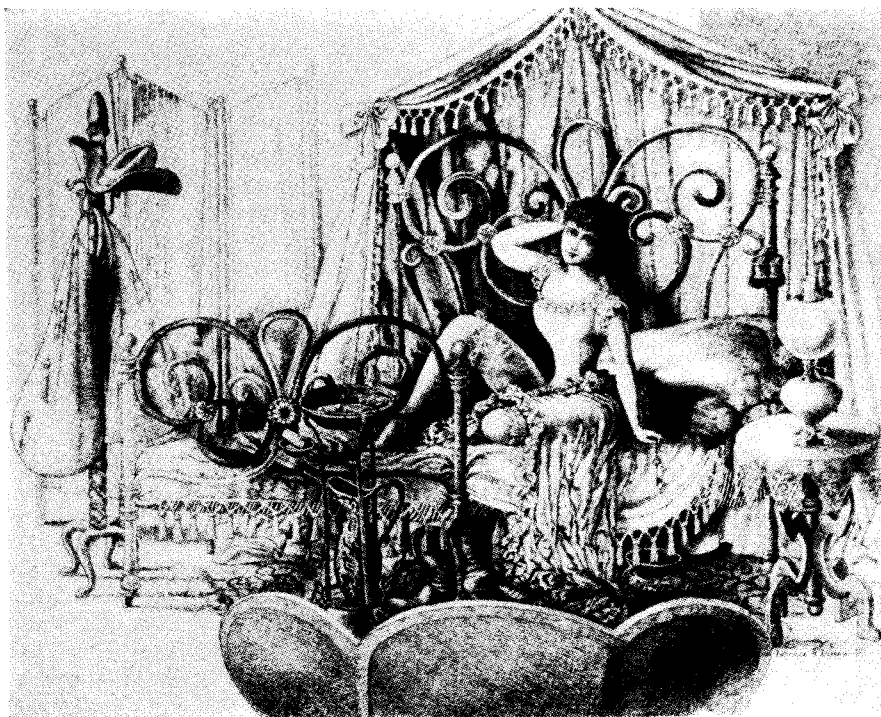
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# THE SINCERE SINNING OF THE ONE SOUND STATE

by Lucius Beebe



—Terence Duren from "The American West."

The Everleigh sisters, legendary figures in the annals of commercialized love in the American west.

WHEN less than a decade ago Nevada's most venerable newspaper, the *Territorial Enterprise*, where Mark Twain had served his literary apprenticeship, and which was once the miners' Bible of the entire West, espoused legalized and socially sanctioned prostitution so emphatically as to make national news, there was an element of head-shaking throughout the land that flatly refused to credit the validity of this reversion to a wilder and far older American West.

The widely publicized "Searchlight Plan," put forth by the *Enterprise*, grew out of a minor civic scuffle in a tiny crossroads in the Southern Deserts. Here, in a dusty ghost town called Searchlight that had once harbored a brief mining boom, the "cocktail waitresses" (as the girls were euphemistically known), were found to outnumber residents engaged in more conventional occupations by about five to one. The reason was an adjacent military installation, and the crisis was brought to public attention when the Nevada State Highway Department complained that the midnight motor traffic to Searchlight had ruined the surface of the only existing highway and that it had no funds for its rehabilitation. The girls were found, too, to be operating within 500 feet of the tiny hamlet's one-room school, a violation of state law, and a hearty old-time frontier free-for-all was inaugurated largely by the *Territorial Enterprise*.

"Don't move the girls," thundered the *Enterprise* in accents which made every wire service in the land. "Move the school."

This was the Searchlight Plan.

An especially provocative statement of the One Sound State's philosophy of live and let live, its explicit moral intransigence and reversion to a pioneer way of thinking may be taken as symptomatic of what makes Nevada still a maverick state, a howling wilderness of free-wheeling tumults that find their expression in easy divorces, legal gambling, and no closing hours for any of the gorgeous multiplicity of saloons and wide-open red-light districts in a number of its neon-lit townships, which