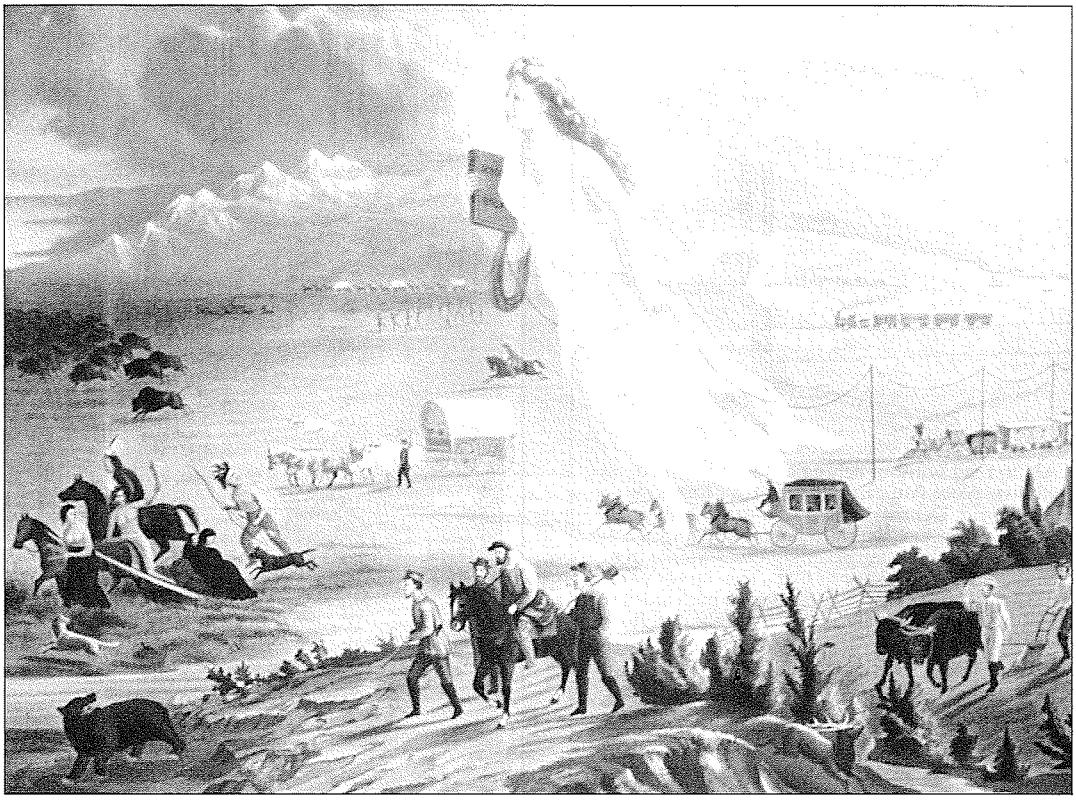

The Wild West looms nowhere nearly so large in the American imagination today as it did only a generation ago. Children whose parents were reared on Bat Masterson during the 1950s now dream of Masters of the Universe. On those rare occasions when Hollywood still deigns to put on spurs and six-shooters, it is more likely to deliver comic send-ups like *Blazing Saddles* and *Silverado* than heroic sagas like *High Noon* and *The Magnificent Seven.* The western myth was popularized by moviemakers, novelists, and painters. But one reason Americans were prepared to believe that the frontier determined the national character was that an eminent turn-of-the-century historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, told them so. Since the 1950s, however, Turner's successors have been hard at work rewriting the history of the West, reversing, or at least strongly qualifying, his judgement. Hollywood is only beginning to catch up. As Brian Dippie shows in this exploration of the new western history, scholars now consider the myths—of independence, of rugged individualism, even of frontier violence—so cold in their graves that the study of myth-making itself has become a major preoccupation.

THE WINNING OF THE WEST RECONSIDERED

by Brian W. Dippie

We are now within easy striking distance of 100 years since Frederick Jackson Turner, following the lead of the Superintendent of the Census, proclaimed the end of the frontier and, with it, "the closing of a great historic moment": "The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life."

Then, in 1890, it was all over.

Turner, a young historian at the University of Wisconsin, delivered his paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. The setting gave point to his observations. Chicago was then playing host to a gargantuan fair, the World's Columbian Exposition, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the New World. The session at which Turner spoke met on the Exposition grounds, where buildings coated in plaster of Paris formed a White City, symbolizing civilization's dominion over what not long before had been a wilderness on the shore of Lake Michigan. Chicago's magical growth was, in microcosm, the story of America. Four centuries after Columbus's landfall, a century since white settlers began occupying the interior of the continent, there was no frontier left, no vast reserve of "free land" to the west.

Turner's timing was acute, the psychological moment perfect to find symbolic meaning in recent events. The rise of the Ghost Dance movement, with its vision of a rejuvenated Indian America, the arrest and killing of Sioux leader Sitting Bull on December 15, 1890, the culminating tragedy at Wounded Knee two weeks later—all attested that the "winning of the West" was no longer a process but a *fait accompli*. Indian wars, a fact of American life since the first English colony was planted at Jamestown, were finished. There was no longer an Indian domain to contest; it had disappeared, along with the Jeffersonian vision of an agrarian democracy resting on an abundance of cheap land.

Whatever else farmer discontent represented in the 1890s, it manifested an awareness of the new urban-industrial order. America's 20th-century future was reaffirmed in Chicago the year after the Exposition, when labor unrest erupted into violence and troops that had served on distant frontiers "taming" Indians were shipped in to tame Chicago's unemployed instead.

When Turner read his paper, then, portents were everywhere. Near the Exposition grounds, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was

offering the public its immensely popular version of the frontier experience. Sitting Bull's horse and the cabin from which the chief was led to his death were both on display. Frederic Remington, the artist most responsible for the public's perceptions of life in the West, was on hand to tour the Exposition's midway and to take in Buffalo Bill's show; a year later he was back in Chicago to cheer George Armstrong Custer's old unit, the "gallant Seventh," against, as he put it, "the malodorous crowd of anarchistic foreign trash."

It did not take a prophet to discern a pattern in all this, but Turner reached beyond the obvious. Frontiering, he argued, was not merely a colorful phase of American history. It had actually shaped the American character. On the frontier, environment prevailed over inherited culture. The frontier promoted individualism, self-reliance, practicality, optimism, and a democratic spirit that rejected hereditary constraints. In Turner's reading of U.S. history, the significance of the frontier was simply enormous. To understand American history, one had to understand western history. Whatever distinguished Americans as a people, Turner believed, could be attributed to the cumulative experience of westering: "What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States."

Turner's audience in Chicago received these ideas with polite indifference. In time, however, the frontier thesis gained influential adherents. For almost half a century, it served as the master explanation of American development. Problems of fact and interpretation were acknowledged. But Turner's essay offered a coherent, self-flattering vision of the American past, and it seemed prophetic in anticipating American involvement abroad. It would be "rash," Turner wrote, to "assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased .... [T]he American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." Cuba and the Philippines soon proved him right. Like any good historical explanation, the frontier thesis seemed to account for past *and* future. Finally, its sweeping imagery and elegiac tone nicely matched the nostalgic mood, which, during the 20th century, would make the mythic Wild West a global phenomenon.

The inadequacy of the frontier thesis did not become plain until the 1940s, after the complex industrial civilization it sought to explain had suffered through the Great Depression and risen to become a world power. But if American history was only temporarily under Turner's shadow, western history has never quite emerged.

Begin with the basics: time and place. Turner's West was a fluid concept, an advancing frontier line and a retreating area of free land. If one instead defined the West as a geographical entity—that old standby "the trans-Mississippi West," for example—then over half of western American history proper has transpired since Turner's 1890 cutoff date. What the Louisiana Purchase inaugurated in 1803 is an ongoing story of growth and change. The boundaries of this geographic West are

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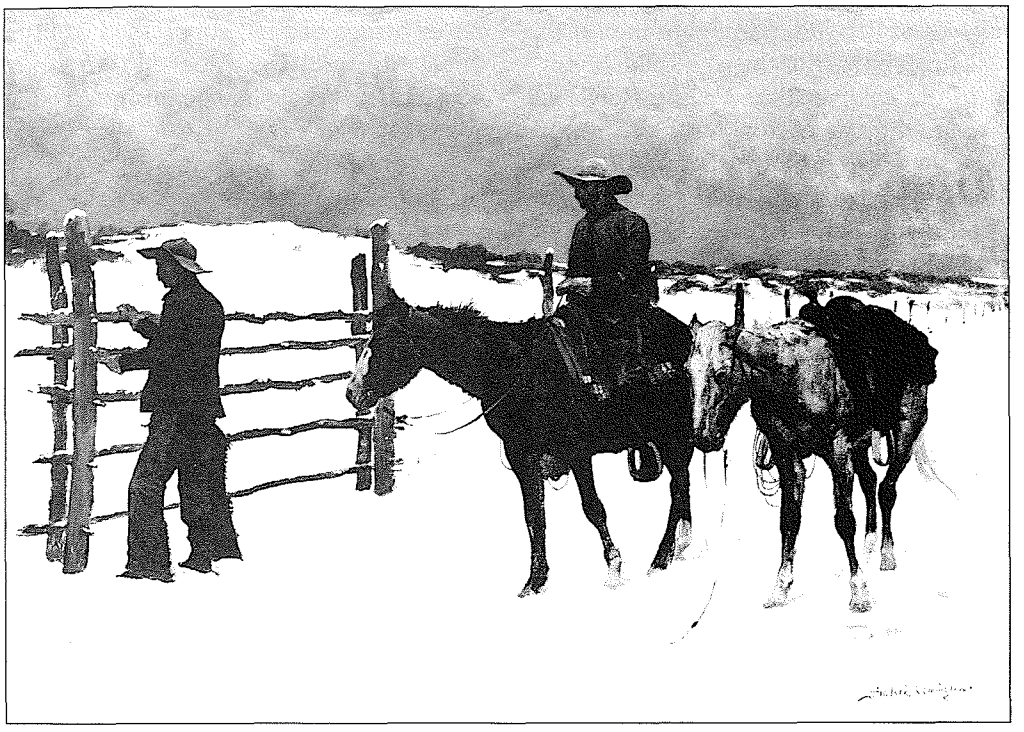


Frederic Remington, one of the creators of the frontier myth, painted The Fall of the Cowboy *(above) in 1895 as a lament for a way of life that seemed to be vanishing as cattle ranchers enclosed the open range with barbed wire. It was not only the cowboy's supposed freedom that Remington and others admired; it was his status as a kind of Anglo-Saxon ideal at a time when "foreign swarms" were taking over the eastern cities. Nearly a century later, in the* San Jose Mercury-News *(April 15, 1990), reporter Michael Zielenziger added a new twist to the cowboy's saga:*

Wyoming, the Cowboy State, is facing a shortage of cowboys.

One would not think so. On every state license plate, cowboys ride broncos. The university football team is the Cowboys. Likenesses of cowboys gallop through restaurants and saunter across billboards throughout this large, lonesome state.

But to ranch owners like Georgie LeBarr, those symbols represent the romance of the Old West, not the reality of the new. Truth is, no one wants the job these days.

"Nobody wants to work that hard," said LeBarr, who grew up on a ranch and never intends to leave her rolling spread.

As a result, LeBarr is among the first U.S. ranchers to legally import Mexican cowboys to work on her 400,000-acre ranch properties straddling two states. She can do that because the federal government has for the first time certified that no qualified American citizens are interested in the work.

"Nobody wants to be a cowboy," said Oralia Mercado, executive director of the Mountain Plains Agricultural Service, which helps ranchers like LeBarr find suitable workers. "It's hard work, it's dirty work, it's round-the-clock work. It's not something a U.S. worker wants to do."

This month, for the first time, Mercado's organization imported Mexican *vaqueros*, or cowboys, to work with cattle on the open range of Wyoming and the Dakotas. It is a formal acknowledgment that efforts to hire qualified cow hands have met with failure.

It is also a reminder to the families still working the range in this sparsely populated state that their traditional, even romantic, way of life is quickly disappearing.

"We advertised in the newspapers and on radio, but we got zero results," Mercado said, displaying a classified ad that appeared in a Denver newspaper. "I can't see that there's anyone in the U.S. that wants this job. The status of being a cowboy just doesn't exist anymore."

usually set at the 49th parallel to the north, the Mexican border to the south, the Mississippi to the east, and the Pacific Ocean to the west, though historians have found each of these too arbitrary. Some see these boundaries as too inclusive to be meaningful, others as too restrictive. Historians of the fur trade might want to embrace all of North America, historians of the borderlands all of Mexico, students of outlawry the Old Southwest, and students of the Indian wars the Old Northwest.

Then there is the matter of time. Turner's frontier West ended with the 19th century. To effect a revolution in western history one need simply move forward into the 20th. Immediately, most of the familiar signposts are missing: fur trade and exploration, Indian wars and Manifest Destiny (overland migration, war with Mexico, Mormonism, the slavery expansion controversy), gold rushes and railroad building, vigilantism and six-gun violence, trail drives and the open-range cattle industry, the farmers' frontier and the Populist revolt. Beyond 1900, a different West emerges, a hard-scrabble land rich in scenery and resources, perhaps, but thinly populated for the most part, chronically short of capital and reliant on government aid (such as cheap water and access to federal lands), a cultural backwater whose primary appeal nationally is as the setting for a romantic historical myth. Writing in a bittersweet key about the creation of these myths in *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (1986), historian Robert G. Athearn began by recalling his own boyhood sojourn at his grandfather's Montana ranch: "To me, the wilderness just couldn't hold a candle to indoor plumbing. Of course, I was just a kid, an unformed man whose regard for the freedom of the untouched country was yet nascent. I had not yet developed a sense of romance or the appreciation of idealized landscapes. I never before had felt suppressed or imprisoned. Not until I was locked into the Missouri River breaks and banished from the world, so to speak."

A romantic myth that is untrue for the present is probably untrue for the past as well. By redefining western history's subject-matter, a 20th-century perspective encourages a reassessment of the 19th century. That process began in 1955, when Earl Pomeroy of the University of Oregon published a breakthrough essay, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment."* Not only did it pull together many scholars' dissatisfactions with the frontier thesis; it offered a persuasive alternative.

The crux of Pomeroy's revision was in the word "continuity." "America was Europe's 'West' before it was America," a pair of literary critics once observed. Frontiering was a global phenomenon, as old as the idea of the West, which was freighted with significance even for the ancient Greeks. More than a direction or a place, the West was a cultural ideal signifying quest and the prospect of fulfillment in some elusive Elysium. To the west, then, myths ran their course, and America was simply a new stage for an old dream.

Charging the Turnerians with a "radical environmental bias," Pomeroy argued that inherited culture had strongly persisted in the West. Indeed, cultural continuity, imitation in everything from state constitutions to architectural styles, a deep conservatism only intensified by the process of moving away from established centers, and a constant search for respectability and acceptance—these, not individualism, inventiveness, and an untrammeled democratic spirit, were the real characteristics of the West. "Conservatism, inheritance, and con-

*Pomeroy's essay appeared in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (March 1955).

tinuity bulked at least as large in the history of the West as radicalism and environment," Pomeroy wrote. "The westerner has been fundamentally [an] imitator rather than [an] innovator.... He was often the most ardent of conformists."

For the popular image of the West as pathbreaker for the nation, Pomeroy substituted the West as a kind of colonial dependency, an area dominated by eastern values, eastern capital, eastern technology, eastern politics. To understand American development, one need no longer look west; but to understand western development, one *had* to look east. That was the essence of Earl Pomeroy's reorientation.

To historians born during the 20th century, Pomeroy's version of the western past seems much nearer the mark than Turner's. Moreover, Pomeroy reinvigorated western history by suggesting subjects outside the frontier thesis that merited investigation—frontier justice, constitution-making, and politics and parties. His call was answered, most notably, by Yale's Howard Lamar, who sought to rectify the historical neglect of the later territorial period with *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889* (1956) and *The Far Southwest, 1846–1912: A Territorial History* (1966). In the latter, Lamar showed that the various cultures imported into the Southwest remained remarkably impervious to what Turner had regarded as the homogenizing influence of the frontier environment. "Throughout the territorial period New Mexico remained stubbornly and overwhelmingly Spanish-American in culture, tradition-directed in habits, and Roman Catholic in religion. Indeed, Anglo-American citizens remained the minority ethnic group in New Mexico until 1928. Colorado, on the other hand, was essentially an American frontier mining society, which retained close business and social connections with the American East. The settlers of Utah, though partly native American in origin, felt so persecuted because of their firm belief in the Mormon religion—and the accompanying doctrine of polygamous marriage—that they deliberately developed their own unique social and political systems.... The diverse pioneer settlers of Arizona Territory, hailing from Mexican Sonora, the Confederate South, the American Northeast, and Mormon Utah, formed a conglomerate American frontier society not quite like any of the other three."

Another staple of revisionist western history is economic studies emphasizing the West's dependence on eastern investment capital. In his 1955 essay, Pomeroy wrote that the economic history even of "the pre-agricultural frontiers" would come to rest "on the cold facts of invest-

One would not know it from watching John Wayne movies, but after the Civil War up to 25 percent of all cowhands were black. Here, black cowboys gather at a fair in Bonham, Texas, in 1910.

SHOWDOWN IN DODGE CITY

Was it really a wild, wild West before settlers tamed the frontier? More like a mild, mild West, concluded historian Robert Dykstra. The Cattle Towns *(1968), his relentlessly factual study of Dodge City and four other fabled Kansas towns during the supposedly wild years between 1870 and 1885, suggests that neither outlaws nor lawmen spent much on ammunition.*

Many legendary desperadoes and gunfighters sojourned in the cattle towns at one time or another, but few participated in slayings. Among those with clean records were such famed killers as Clay Allison, Doc Holliday, and Ben Thompson. The teen-aged gunman John Wesley Hardin was responsible for only one verifiable cattle-town homicide, apparently having fired through the wall of his hotel room one drunken night to silence a man snoring too loudly in the adjoining cubicle. Nor did famous gunfighters serving as officers add much to the fatality statistics. As city marshal of Abilene in 1871, his only term as a cattle-town lawman, the formidable Wild Bill Hickok killed just two men—one, a "special" policeman, by mistake. Wyatt Earp, who served as an officer (but never actually as marshal) at both Wichita and Dodge City, may have mortally wounded one law violator, though he shared credit with another policeman for this single cattle-town homicide. The now equally renowned lawman William B. ("Bat") Masterson, at least according to contemporary sources, killed no one in or around Dodge, where he lived for several years.

With these celebrated personalities contributing far less than their supposed share, it is hardly surprising that the overall homicide statistics are not particularly high....

The number of homicides never topped five in any one cattle-season year between 1870 and 1885, and reached this figure only at Ellsworth in 1873 and at Dodge City five years later. In both instances, homicides may have been said to have manifested "wave" dimensions, and were in fact thus considered by local residents. In at least six years no fatalities occurred at all.... The zeros recorded for two busy [cattle trade] years at Dodge City seem particularly meaningful. The average number of homicides per cattle-town trading season amounted to only 1.5 per year.

In the case of at least six of these killings—or well over 10 percent—it is hard to identify any connection whatever with the existence of the cattle trade. Besides a Wichita insurance murder, and the murder of an Abilene tailor and the lynching of *his* murderer, already noted, these included the shootings of a Wichita hotel keeper resisting arrest on a federal warrant, that of one Wichita Negro by another, and that of a Caldwell housewife by her drunken husband.

The majority of those involved in homicides, however, were indeed law officers, cowboys and drovers, or gamblers—the last a somewhat elastic category to accommodate four ex-lawmen without obvious means of support. Of homicide victims, nine were

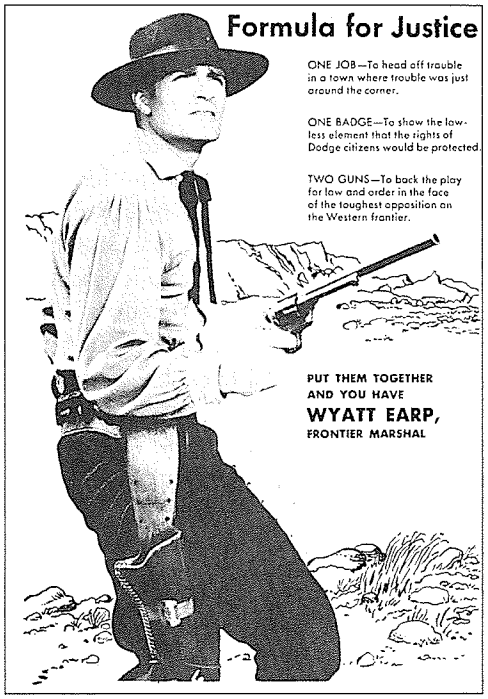
ment capital." However, he said, "we still know the homesteader better than the landlord, the railroad builder better than the railroad operator. The trapper, the prospector, and the cowboy, moving picturesquely over a background of clean air and great distances, hold us more than the tycoons and corporations that dominated them."

The revisionists had their work cut out. They showed, in William H. Goetzmann's memorable phrase, that even the trappers, those legendary embodiments of wanderlust, were Jacksonian men, expectant capitalists out to make their fortune. In *Bill Sublette, Mountain Man* (1959), John E. Sunder detailed the career of one of the most famous beaver trappers of the early 19th century. Sublette frequently relied on eastern capital or credit to keep his dreams alive, and was almost as familiar with the business hotels of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington as he was with the backwoods.

According to legend, cowboys were sec-

cowboys or drovers and nine were gamblers. Six were officers of the law. Aside from the non-cattle-trade killings mentioned above, victims included five townsmen with conventional occupations, three local rural settlers, two dance house proprietors, two miscellaneous visitors (one lawyer and a Pawnee Indian), and one female theatrical entertainer. The status of the remaining two victims is obscure. Analyzed in terms of perpetrators, 16 cattle-town homicides can be attributed to law officers, or citizens legitimately acting as such, 12 to cowboys or drovers, and eight to gamblers. The other nine homicides are distributed evenly among some of the categories already mentioned. These included two lynchings evidently carried out by cattle-town residents rather than transients. Besides the episode at Abilene, a Caldwell gambler and bootlegger was hanged in somewhat mysterious circumstances.

With the exception of killings by law officers and lynchings, the homicidal situations varied considerably. Seventeen apparently resulted from private quarrels, four were accidental or without discernible motive, two were committed by resisters of arrest, two avenged prior homicides, and two consisted of murders for profit. Homicidal disputes involving women, incidentally, exceed by eight to one those mainly resulting from gambling disagreements. Of the six lawmen killed, interestingly enough, half met death in circumstances that must be termed accidental, although two of them—Ellsworth's Sheriff Whitney and the Abilene policeman killed by Marshal Hickok—were attempting to help quell trouble when shot. Only two officers died attempting to make arrests; the other fell in a private quarrel.



Lest tradition be completely overthrown, let it be noted that gunshots were far and away the principal medium of death. But tradition would also have it that the cattle-town homicide typically involved an exchange of shots—the so-called gunfight. Actually, though 39 of the 45 victims suffered fatal bullet or buckshot wounds, less than a third of them returned the fire. A good share of them were apparently not even armed.

ond-generation mountain men, fiddle-footed wanderers with guns on their hips. Their status as what we now refer to as seasonal agrarian workers might be obscured by romance, but, Lewis Atherton noted in *The Cattle Kings* (1961), cowboys were simply hired hands who lived with the environment while their employers, the ranchers, were businessmen out to dominate it. "The cowboy's life involved so much drudgery and loneliness and so little in the way of satisfaction that he drank and caroused to excess on his infrequent visits to the shoddy little cowtowns that dotted the West.... Most of his physical dangers scarcely bordered on the heroic, necessary as they were in caring for other men's cattle, and they served primarily to retire him from cowpunching." Atherton shared the disparaging view of Bruce Sibert, a rancher in the Dakotas during the 1890s: "Only the few good ones got into the cow business and made good." For those who did become ranchers in "the cow business," Gene M.

Gressley observed in *Bankers and Cattlemen* (1966), profit was the motive, capitalization a major problem. Again, eastern money figured prominently.

Nowhere was eastern domination more evident than on the mining frontier. Gold rushes thoroughly disrupted the stately progression of Turner's frontier line, making a shambles of his East-West advance and the stages of social evolution preceding urban civilization. As Richard Wade asserted in *The Urban Frontier* (1959), his history of early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis, "The towns were the spearheads of the frontier."

Mining was a case in point. "On the mining frontier the camp—the germ of the city—appeared almost simultaneously with the opening of the region," Duane A. Smith wrote in *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (1967). In California, the flood of gold-hungry Forty-Niners created an overnight urban civilization with eastern values. In his history of the Far West, *The Pacific Slope* (1965), Pomeroy noted that in 1860 California had a population three times that of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada combined, and an economy thoroughly integrated into that of the Atlantic Seaboard. A network of eastern merchants and investors supplied the California miners through West Coast middlemen. As miners dug deeper into the ground, overhead soared, and the need for capital with it. Thus, the network even stretched across the Atlantic. British investors contributed so heavily that they made the Far West part of Britain's "invisible empire," and provided the leadership to draw out more cautious American investors as well, Clark C. Spence explained in *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier, 1860–1901* (1958). It was not long before the fabled individual prospector and his trusty mule were eclipsed.

In advocating a reorientation of western history, Pomeroy had suggested various paths historians might follow to discover East-West continuities. The study of frontier justice would open into an examination of western legal history. Inquiry into frontier religion, literacy, education, and architecture would establish the westerners' cultural conservatism. Likewise, scrutiny of the U.S. Army in the West would show it to be only intermittently a fighting force but continuously a visible manifestation of the federal government and its role in promoting western development. Forest G. Hill's *Roads, Rails, and Waterways: The Army Engineers and Early Transportation* (1957) and Goetzmann's *Army Explorations in the American West, 1803–1863* (1959) responded to the challenge. Goetzmann went on to redirect the history of western exploration from the exploits of hardy individuals to a collective, nationalistic enterprise in which the federal government played a decisive part, the theme of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (1966). Other histories showed that western communities routinely exaggerated the Indian threat in order to enjoy the benefits—payrolls, improved transportation and communication facilities, even a livelier social life—that an army presence brought. The link between East and West, metropolis and hinterland, federal government and frontier citizen, was everywhere a fact of western life. Even today, the federal government owns vast areas of the West.

By submerging regional in national concerns, "colonial" histories make western history, as such, of limited significance. Regional history is based on the assumption that there are meaningful differences between local and national developments. The South's claim to distinctiveness, historian C. Vann Woodward has argued, arose from its unique past, marked by the un-

WOMEN ON THE ROAD WEST

The five-month ordeal of traveling to California or Oregon offered pioneer women many opportunities to shed traditional feminine roles. Most, wrote Julie Roy Jeffrey in Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880 *(1979), declined to take them.*

As they catalogued each sign of the passing of civilization, women coped with their sense of desolation by reproducing aspects of the world they had left behind. Thus, women arranged their wagons, writing in their journals of the little conveniences they had fixed, the pockets in the wagon's green cloth lining which held "looking-glasses, combs, brushes, and so on," the rag carpet to keep the floor of the tent snug at night, the bedding, sleeping, and dressing arrangements. As one woman explained, she was busy making "our home" comfortable so that there would be little time "for that dreaded disease, 'home-sickness.'" Another hoped to maintain some continuity by dressing as neatly on the trip as she might at home, in a blue traveling dress with white collar and cuffs rather than homespun, linsey-woolsey, or calico.

These attempts to reproduce the rudiments of a home setting and to perpetuate a sense of the familiar, though they might appear trivial, were not. Publicists of domesticity had encouraged women to believe that the physical arrangements of their homes exerted a powerful influence over their families. The makeshifts of the journey were an unconscious way of asserting female power and reassuring women of their sexual identity. And, of course, the objects symbolized an entire way of life temporarily in abeyance. When her husband grumbled about the quantity of her baggage, Lucy Cooke revealed how vital her knickknacks were. Fearing that she would have to discard some . . . , she confessed, "I had a cry about it . . . as I seemed to have parted with near everything I valued."

Although Cooke's husband promised to stop complaining about belongings which provided so much comfort for her, other women would find it difficult to maintain symbolic ties with home life and the female world. The woman who started out in a traveling dress with clean collar and cuffs soon found she had to abandon it for clothes she originally had refused to wear. Indeed, changes in clothing hinted at the social disruption the frontier could cause women. By 1852, some women on the trail were wearing the bloomer costume, finding the "short skirt and pantletts" a "very appropriate dress for a trip like this." Although bloomers were practical, the costume, espoused by feminists as dress for liberated women, carried a radical sexual and political message and was, in the words of one magazine, "ridiculous and indecent." So one woman who had brought bloomers with her found she lacked the "courage" to wear them and vowed, "I would never wear them as long as my other two dresses last." Women bickered over the pros and cons of the costume. Supporters accused women in dresses of being vain and preoccupied with appearance, while they, in turn, replied that bloomers led to male gossip. Said one opponent, "She had never found her dress to be the least inconvenient . . . . [S]he could walk as much in her long dress as she *wanted to, or was proper for a woman* among so many men."

Women's work? Collecting buffalo chips for the campfire on the Great Plains, about 1880.

American experience of guilt arising from slavery, military defeat, and occupation. History, more than any other factor, accounted for southern uniqueness. But Pomeroy's argument robbed the West of its distinctiveness, making it simply an appendage of the East that was neither exceptional nor especially consequential in the history of the nation.

Opposition to that point of view was not long in coming, and it has usually worked some variation on the exceptionalist premise. Gerald D. Nash, the first historian to attempt a synthesis of 20th-century Western history, rejects Turner's 1890 cutoff date and agrees with Pomeroy that colonialism remained a fact of western life well into the 20th century. But Nash argues that World War II liberated the West from its political, economic, and cultural dependency on the East. The year 1945 becomes a new dividing line in western history, signifying the moment not when the frontier passed into oblivion but when the West passed out of colonialism to become "a pace-setter for the nation."

Yet only by focusing on the Sun Belt, and especially on Southern California, is Nash able to make much of a case for the West as a 20th-century pace-setter. One must be cautious in making parts of the West synonymous with the whole and, out of regional pride, discarding too readily the unflattering fact of western dependency.

Such caution characterizes Patricia Nelson Limerick's provocative new synthesis, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987). Limerick is skeptical about talk of the New West, arguing instead for a continuity in western history uninterrupted by any turning points. In her mind, it is this continuity—not links to the East, but the defining western experience "of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences"—that validates a regional approach.

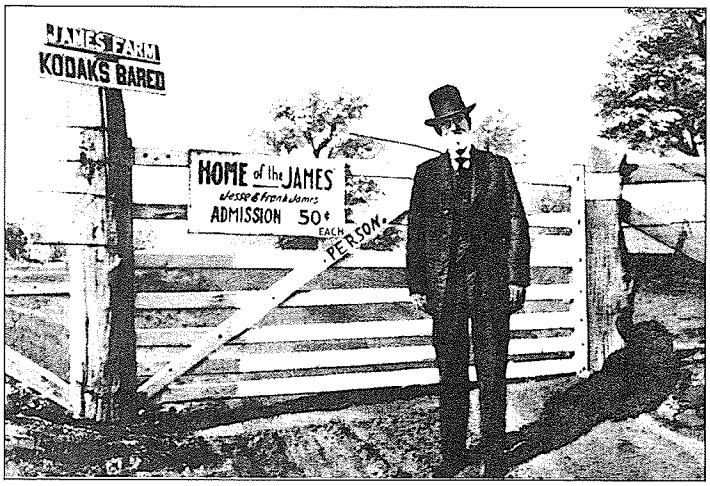
A legacy of conquest, of course, is consonant with Pomeroy's colonial thesis. But Limerick in effect views the East-West relationship from a western perspective rather than a national one. "With its continuity restored," she writes, "western American history carries considerable significance for American history as a whole. Conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation, and the American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences."

"Celebrating one's past, one's tradition, one's heritage," she concludes, "is a bit like hosting a party: one wants to control the guest list tightly.... To celebrate the western past with an open invitation is a considerable risk: The brutal massacres come back along with the cheerful barn raisings, the shysters come back with the saints, contracts broken come back with contracts fulfilled."

Limerick calls her introduction "Closing the Frontier and Opening Western History," as if summoning her fellow historians to put away the toys of childhood and get on with the sterner duties of adulthood. Western historians today regularly berate themselves for failing to keep up with trends in the discipline, for glorying in narrative at the expense of analysis, for favoring the colorful and peripheral to the neglect of the ordinary and substantial. Hard riding makes for easy reading. The very qualities that explained the public's love affair with the West also explained western history's decline in academic circles.

Over the years, suggestions for revitalizing western history have been pretty conventional: Find out where everyone else is going and follow. Learn to quantify. Adopt social-science methodologies. Alter the very nature of historical inquiry and expression or fade into academic oblivion, west-

ern historians were warned. But the most extravagant claims for the new social history, for example, have been recanted, and dire predictions about the early demise of "old-fashioned" history have failed to come true. It is apparent now that the advocates of new history too often adopted the strategy of Melville's lightning-rod salesman and sold fear rather than necessity. To date, the net effect of the new history revolution has been new topics rather than a consistent new direction for western history, fragmentation rather than synthesis.



Among the many westerners who found it profitable to promote the Western mystique was Jesse James's brother Frank, shown here about 1914 at the family farm in Excelsior Springs, Missouri.

Turner's thesis is now notorious for excluding women and everyone whose skin was dark or whose language was not English. Indians were obstacles handy for demarking the frontier line and eliciting pioneer traits in the white men who would overcome them; women apparently stayed in the East until the land was tidied up and made presentable; Mexicans and other ethnics never existed.

Women have been a favorite topic of the new history. Studies of army wives and daughters, women teachers, women on the overland trails, farm women, prostitutes, divorcees, widows, and urban women have forever altered the sentimental stereotypes of sunbonneted pioneer mothers and soiled doves with hearts of gold.

Pomeroy's argument for cultural continuity has been echoed in discussions of one key issue: Did the move West liberate women from conventional sex roles or not? John Mack Faragher concludes *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979) with a flat negative: "The move West called upon people not to change but to transfer old sexual roles to a new but altogether familiar environment." While confessing that she had hoped to find otherwise, Julie Roy Jeffrey, in *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (1979), is forced to agree with Faragher: "The frontier experience served to reinforce many conventional familial and cultural ideas.... The concept of woman as lady, the heart of domestic ideology, survived."

Jeffrey did detect some changes in women's roles. Prostitutes, for instance, were treated as individuals in the West rather than simply as a pariah class. Polly Welts Kaufman in *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (1984) also strains against the limitations implied by the colonial interpretation, noting that the 250 women who went west to teach for the National Board of Popular Education before the Civil War decided to do so largely out of a desire for independence and control over their lives. Kaufman concedes, however, that teaching was among the few occupations that met "society's expectations for women." Liberation plays an even larger part in Paula Petrik's *No Step Backward: Woman and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Fron-*

THE FINAL FRONTIER?

"Our nation's quest for the unknown," President George Bush declared when he announced plans to put an American on Mars by the year 2039, "took American pioneers from the bluffs of the Mississippi to the mountains of the Moon. But today... it's time to open up the final frontier." Such equations of outer space with the American West are very familiar—and very much in need of reconsideration, says Patricia Nelson Limerick, a historian at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In a paper presented at the Second Colorado Space Policy Workshop in Boulder on September 8, 1989, she argued that the real value of the frontier metaphor is hidden.

Consider President Ronald Reagan's speech, delivered on the Fourth of July, 1982, at the landing of the shuttle Columbia: "In the future, as in the past, our freedom, independence, and national well-being will be tied to new achievements, new discoveries, and pushing back frontiers. The fourth landing of the Columbia is the historical equivalent to the driving of the golden spike which completed the first transcontinental railroad."

In making this comparison, neither Reagan nor his speech writers had to *think*; by 1982, this way of speaking and thinking was so well set that no one would say, "Does that comparison make any sense? Does the landing of the space shuttle really have anything to do with the building of the transcontinental railroad?"

Now the first thing that strikes the western historian is that President Reagan and his speech writers thought that this frontier business was a *happy* comparison, the right comparison for an occasion of congratulations. But add a few facts to, say, the picture of the golden spike, and things look a bit different. What the president thought was just a light "Have-a-Nice-Day" reference to history *could* have been a pretty useful warning, *if* anyone had taken it seriously.

When they connected the railroad lines at Promontory Point in 1869, the representative from the Central Pacific, Leland Stanford, proved unfamiliar with a sledgehammer and could not hit the golden spike. The inability of a railroad executive to perform the most elemental act of railroad construction might—if anyone wanted to take these analogies seriously—say something about the gap between executive planning and hands-on implementation that transportation industries are vulnerable to, and it would deepen that point to recognize that much of the railroad trackage theoretically "completed" in 1869 actually had been laid in such a rush that much of it had to be laid

tier, Helena, Montana, 1865–1900 (1987). The move west, Petrik maintained, did change things for some women, at least during the frontier period.

Another prominent strain of western historical scholarship takes the western myth itself as its subject. Americans have loved the Wild West myth with an abiding, though some say waning, passion. It has circled the globe in its appeal. To its critics, however, the myth is an invitation to the wrong set of values. It embodies an essentially conservative ethos—rugged individualism, stern justice, indifference or hostility to women and ethnics, exploitation of the environment, development at any cost. But it also embodies the American dream, and has served as the polestar for generations of immigrants who sought a greater measure of human happiness in a land of unrivaled wealth and opportunity.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the popular image of the Wild West is largely the work of outsiders meeting outside needs. There seems no escaping eastern domination. Pomeroy himself traced an aspect of this cultural imperialism in his imaginative *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (1957). The West, he found, became whatever the eastern tourist wanted it to be: "[F]or 60 or 70 years... tourists had to be reassured, and westerners felt that they had to assure them, that the West was no longer wild and

again almost immediately. In other words, a reference to the golden spike, to anyone who is serious about history, is also a reference to enterprises done with too much haste and grandstanding, and with too little care for detail.

Ronald Reagan also did not know, or care, that one half of the first transcontinental, the Union Pacific Railroad, went bankrupt 25 years later in the depression of the 1890s, or that the other half, the Central Pacific, even though it became more prosperous, did so by keeping a stranglehold on Pacific coast traffic, charging all that the traffic would bear, through its affiliate, the Southern Pacific, the company known as the Octopus, the company whose chief attorney was widely understood to hold much greater power in the state of California than the so-called governor did. With all that prosperity, the Central Pacific still played out a prolonged drama in trying to avoid paying back its government loans and in trying to get out of the interest payments.

Add to this the far-reaching corruption in Congress that came out of federal aid to railroads, and add the rough and even brutal working conditions on the railroad, especially for the Chinese working on the Central Pacific in the Sierras in winter; add it all together—executive misbehavior, large-scale corruption, shoddy construction, brutal labor exploitation, financial inefficiency—and it's a wonder that when the president compared the shuttle landing to the golden spike, someone from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration didn't hit him for insulting the organization's honor. It's a wonder no one—no shuttle pilot, mission coordinator, mechanic, or technician—said, "Now cut that out—we may have our problems, but it's nowhere near that bad."

That's the joy of the present status of the frontier metaphor—you can use it to say things that are really quite insulting to the integrity of the space program, and the people thus insulted will smile and say, "Thank you."

woolly—until fashions changed and it was time to convince them that it was as wild as it ever had been."

How wild was it to begin with? There is an established tradition in western history of separating fiction from fact to get at the truth behind the frontier's most storied individuals and episodes. Don Russell's *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (1960), Joseph G. Rosa's *They Called Him Wild Bill: The Life and Adventures of James Butler Hickok* (1964, rev. 1974), William A. Settle, Jr.'s *Jesse James Was His Name; or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* (1966), Robert K. De Arment's *Bat Masterson: The Man and the Legend* (1979), and Jack Burrows's *John Ringo: The Gunfighter Who Never Was* (1987) are good examples of this approach to biography.

Cultural historians find the legends more arresting—and revealing—than the facts. Strip Billy the Kid of his myth and little of historical consequence remains. Even the number of his victims does not hold up under scrutiny. But the mythic Billy the Kid is full of interest, as Stephen Tatum explains in *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America* (1982). During the first 40 years after his death at the hands of Pat Garrett in 1881, writers (including Garrett himself in his *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid*) portrayed the Kid as the villain in "a romance story

dramatizing civilization's triumph over a stubborn, resistant, and savage wilderness."

For roughly the next 30 years, however, Billy was portrayed in a more positive light. Disillusioned by the power of gangsters and the weakness and corruption of government, the Kid's "creators"—including the composer Aaron Copland, who wrote the score for the 1938 ballet, *Billy the Kid*—conjured up a new image. Because society is "unable to defend itself or recognize the evil within its own ranks," Tatum writes, "the outsider like the Kid enters the scene to save the day and restore a society of common people being threatened by evil bankers and their henchmen. Yet no matter how noble his actions, in this era the Kid is not integrated into society at story's end."

But after 1955, Tatum continues, inventions of the Kid "typically omit the romance framework of civilization's progress or foundation, and instead present a dehumanizing society at odds with an authentic individual's personal code." No longer is there much hope that the hero can transform the world; the Kid "appears in works that dramatize the individual at odds with society, a civil law unrelated to moral law, and violence hardly legitimated or regenerative." This culminated in the purely meaningless cinematic violence of Sam Peckinpah's famous *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Today, the Kid awaits new mythmakers.

Since cultural values shift over time, myths, in order to remain relevant, shift their meanings as well. If the major challenge facing western history is to relate past to present in a meaningful way, the mythic approach has much to offer. It accounts for continuity *and* change. George Armstrong Custer is dead, his Last Stand long over. Why then do so many people continue to refight it? Why can they still see it in their minds? Why are passions still aroused by the man? We may dismiss Custer as a minor figure historically, but he was once a national hero, a martyr to cause and country, held up as a model for America's youth. His defenders still think him a paragon, if not a saint, and he has been compared to Jesus. His detractors regard him as a racist villain, fit symbol for America's mistreatment of its native peoples. In 1988, a Sioux activist likened him to Adolf Hitler and argued that the Custer Battlefield National Monument was as welcome in Indian country as a Hitler monument would be in Israel.

Myths have consequences, and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973) and *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985) are the most ambitious attempts yet to trace patterns of frontier mythology, from Cotton Mather through Walt Whitman and Theodore Roosevelt. So deeply has the language of the frontier myth been woven into our popular culture, he writes, "that it still colors the way we count our wealth and estimate our prospects, the way we deal with nature and with the nations so that the Myth can still tell us what to look for when we look at the stars."

Works like Slotkin's assume something Turner labored to prove: American exceptionalism. On the other hand, they encourage a reexamination of the qualities supposedly fostered by frontiering and which, according to Turner, combined to form the American character.

The character-forming western myth is marked by some notable omissions. "Where are the women in this tradition?" asked Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski in *Women and Western American Literature* (1982). It is a question that cuts to the heart of a male myth steeped in escapist fantasies. The myth does include In-

dians, but simply as part of the savage Nature that the white pioneer was expected to subdue, a test of the sort that meets any quester after Elysium. The native *fact* offers its own rebuttal: The white man's occupation of America was an armed invasion, nothing more, nothing less.

When one moves from individuals and events and omissions to the qualities or traits revered in western myth, it is apparent that the myth generates its own critiques, its own counter-images.

Rugged individualists taming a raw wilderness? Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967, rev. 1982) and Lee Clark Mitchell's *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (1981) show that frontiering and its apotheosis of axe and plow created a contrary reaction, a conservationist outlook that deplored the wastefulness inherent in pioneering and opened the way to resource management and federal controls.

Buoyant optimism and the mastery of material things? The lunacy of such hopeful frontier slogans as "Rain follows the plow" was revealed during the 1930s, when the interior of the continent turned into a dust bowl, spurring a massive internal migration that exposed the hollow promise of western opportunity. The California Dream? Ask the Okies.

Cowboy freedom in a spacious land where all were equal? Ask the multitude of western wage-earners who found the pay low, conditions hard, strife endemic, upward mobility limited, and independence illusory. Or ask any racial minority struggling to get ahead in the West.

Six-gun justice and self-reliance? The horrifying rate of contemporary violence would seem rebuttal enough to such a cherished tradition, but in *The Cattle Towns* (1968), Robert Dykstra shoots down the Hollywood version of Dodge City and its ilk. [See box, p. 76.]

Abundant natural resources ensuring all a chance to prosper? The antimyth points to the depletion and spoliation of a rich heritage, a destructive "Myth of Superabundance," and the rise of resource monopolization and agribusiness, the creation of a boom-and-bust economy, and a continuing reliance on the federal government. More colonialism, and precious little individual opportunity. Myth, after all, is myth.

For the historian, the western myth offers a skewed but revealing national portrait, a study not in what was but in what once seemed desirable. To the extent that it was always false, we have a measure of the distance between expectation and reality in western and American history. To the extent that it now seems unbecoming, we have a measure of the distance between the values of yesterday and today. The myth and the antimyth are keys to the western past and the western present that can also unlock the American past and the American present.