

The Frontier As Cultural Myth

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“Westward Tilt” is the title of a book about the population explosion in modern California written by the late San Diego newspaper columnist and editor Neil Morgan. The term, however is an appropriate description of the ever-shifting American frontier, most commonly defined as undeveloped land beyond the Mississippi. However, when our nation consisted of 13 colonies, unsettled geographical areas beyond them were its frontiers.

“Go west, young man, go west” was advice believed to have been stated first in 1851 by journalist John Soule in the *Terre Haute Express* but popularized by Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, who offered it in 1865. The words became almost the motto of 19th century America and an expression of historical mission, or Manifest Destiny, as well. This was the belief that because the U.S. was both more advanced and enlightened than other cultures it had not only a God-given right but an actual obligation to bring its civilizing influence to the West.

“Our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions”, wrote the editor of *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, John L. O’Sullivan, in 1845, coining the term. Poet and essayist Walt Whitman in 1846 expressed it as the great mission of peopling the new world with a noble race. In more stark, even Darwinian, terms, Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1884 while ranching in Dakota Territory that it was “our manifest destiny to swallow up the land of all adjoining nations who were too weak to stand with us”.

The concept of race, and therefore of nations, presented a contradiction within the notion of manifest destiny: the “noble race” was white; both Indians and Mexicans were considered less than noble and if not a threat, at least an impediment to “civilizing” the West, even if

improving or regenerating them could be accomplished. The Indian aspect of this dilemma was dealt with by forcibly moving various tribes to locations out of the way of settlement, and the Mexican aspect was ended by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War. This ceded the land that became the states of California, Nevada and Arizona, as well as part of what is now New Mexico, to the expanding U.S.

A sense of mission was not necessary for an assumption of perpetual progress to become associated with the ongoing exploration and settlement of the frontier--- expansion and progress for the nation, and expansion and progress for those who dared to remove themselves from family, friends and familiarity in search of a fresh start, a second chance.

The development and settlement of that land, necessitating exploration and change, resulted in an accompanying sense of adventure, of opportunity, of reinvention, of rugged individualism, and consequently of optimism. The possibility, in fact the probability, of a new life for those pioneers who ventured westward became a romantic vision. But bringing civilization into an often harsh wilderness harboring both unpredictable weather and natives regarded as strange and savage is a reality far from romance.. Thus the desire to leave an unsatisfactory status quo in order to achieve the imagined improvements of the new existed along with a wariness and suspicion of the unknown, two sides of the pioneer coin, as it were.

The quest for personal space was coupled with a desire for ownership as well as a respect for the property rights and boundary lines established by government surveys as a framework for legal property ownership. But achievement of that goal sometimes involved devastation of native peoples as well as of native animals and plants of the West.

Out of this existential stew have come not only accounts of exploration but expressions of imagination and creativity which have

continued to enrich and sometimes typify American life through the years.

The official account of the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean, commissioned by Thomas Jefferson, was published in 1814. Stamps, monuments, television and many exhibitions have commemorated it, among them a centennial display at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and in 2004 a bicentennial series of events along its route.

James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 "Last of the Mohicans" set in 1757 during the French and Indian War, is considered the first American adventure story. Taking place on the northeast frontier of the then-British colonies, Cooper's five "Leatherstocking Tales" portray Natty Bumppo, called Hawkeye, the woodsman, scout and spy for the British, who has come to be a symbol of the qualities that define America: bravery, self-reliance, and democracy. In this second of the series, Hawkeye's helpful companion is the Indian Chingatchgook. The story has been adapted for film, stage, radio, television, comics, and even opera. And could the Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian sidekick Tonto, first created in 1933 Detroit as a radio drama and still more widely popularized, have been inspired by Cooper's creation?

From 1847-1849 Knickerbocker's Magazine serialized Francis Parkman's sketches concerning his 1846 summer expedition on the high plains area that would become Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado and Kansas, the first third of the Oregon Trail. Parkman viewed the experience through the lens of Manifest Destiny, as did Theodore Roosevelt in his 4-volume narrative "Winning of the West", first published in 1889.

The poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" by Walt Whitman, first published in his 1865 Leaves of Grass, uses the myth of the West as a continuum linking the past to the future and potential of America. A future use that Whitman could not have imagined was a 2009 series of Levi's commercials featuring actor Will Geer reading part of the poem

along with an 1890 recording of Whitman reading his poem “America.” And during the 2013 NCAA Division 1 football season, parts of the poem were used in a Pacific-12 Conference commercial. The first novel of Willa Cather’s Great Plains trilogy is about a Swedish immigrant family in Nebraska; published in 1913; its title *O Pioneers* is said to be from Whitman’s poem. The novel became a 1992 movie and a 2009 opera.

The publisher of a popular series of western travel guides in 1872 commissioned Brooklyn painter John Gast’s “American Progress”, widely distributed as a commercial color print. It depicts a giant female figure, Columbia, representing the U.S., holding both a school book and a coil of wire trailing back to a line of tiny poles, along which is a tiny railroad. Also beneath her are tiny figures on horseback, a covered wagon and a herd of tiny buffalo, all of which are advancing in the same direction. Beyond them all are a river with miniscule boats and a dramatic sky.

Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*, published in 1872, about his 1861-1867 travels in the “Wild West” became a cable television movie in 2002.

In 1883 William F. Cody founded “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West”, a circus-like pageant that celebrated but exaggerated life in the West and toured the country for four years, defining for many Americans their image of the West. In 1887 the show traveled to Europe for performances there. Cody himself had been a scout for the army and earned his nickname as a buffalo hunter for the railroads, but had become famous as the hero of a sensationalized 1872 dime novel by Ned Buntline and a performer in a stage version of the book.

The show highlighted such real personalities as Cody himself, sharpshooter Annie Oakley, Davy Crockett and Kit Carson, who have become legendary in film, television, and comic book versions of their stories. Oakley is also the subject of a 1946 musical with songs by Irving Berlin. The escapades of frontiersman Crockett became the subject of a 5 episode television series in 1954 and 1955 depicting him as Indian

fighter, as Tennessee legislator, and as defender of the Alamo; mass-produced copies of his coonskin hat were coveted and worn by thousands of boys. Carson, Indian fighter, trapper and explorer, achieved national fame as the guide who led John C. Fremont through much of California, Oregon and the Great Basin during the 1840s.

The September 1893 issue of Harper's Monthly contained "The Evolution of the Cowpuncher", a collaboration of writer Owen Wister and artist Frederick Remington, who supplied the concept and factual content as well as the illustrations. The project was the first statement of the mythical cowboy in American literature and generated the ensuing genre of Western fiction, film and entertainment. Remington, who in 1881 Montana had seen the authentic, still relatively untamed Old West, also originated "cowboy" sculpture with his 1895 piece *The Broncho Buster* [sic].

Perhaps the most important book of the era is Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, published in 1885 and told in the first person voice of a young boy running away from the strictures of society, going on the road—or in this case, the river. With a non-white man as the moral center, and written in vernacular expression, the novel changed American literature. Expressing resolve not to give in to accepted standards and resisting attempts to "sivilize me", Huck declares, "But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest....".

Another fictional character wishing to leave the society he knows is Yancey Cravat of Edna Ferber's 1930 novel Cimarron, who sees in the Oklahoma land rush of 1889 the opportunity to rescue his wife from "civilized mediocrity" and head west for the untamed life of the pioneer.

The frontier motifs of rebirth and survival, in this case reactions to the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, are themes of John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, 1939. His characters, the poverty-stricken Joad family, leave Oklahoma and head westward searching for fertile land.

Celebrating the land in an idealized way is “Home on the Range”, a song regarded as the unofficial anthem of the American West and adopted in 1947 as the official state song of Kansas. Originally written as a poem in the 1870s in that state, it was set to music later. It begins:

“Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam, Where the deer and the antelope play, Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, And the skies are not cloudy all day. Where the air is so pure, and the zephyrs so free, The breezes so balmy and light, That I would not exchange my home on the range, For all of the cities so bright.”

Freedom, from both physical and behavioral restraint, is a theme echoing in American literature and culture, and in song, epitomized by Cole Porter’s 1934 “Don’t Fence Me In”. Although Porter composed the music, the lyrics were written by poet and engineer Robert Fletcher, who worked with the Department of Highways in Helena, Montana:

“Oh give me land, lots of land under starry skies above; Don’t fence me in. Let me ride through the wide open country that I love; Don’t fence me in. Let me be by myself in the evening breeze, Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees; Send me off forever but I ask you please, Don’t fence me in. Just turn me loose, let me straddle my old saddle underneath the western skies. On my cayuse let me wander over yonder till I see the mountain rise. I want to ride to the ridge where the West commences, gaze at the moon till I lose my senses; Can’t look at hobbles and I can’t stand fences; Don’t fence me in.”

Cowboy actor Roy Rogers introduced it in a 1944 Warner Brothers movie; Kate Smith sang it on radio; Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters recorded it in 1944.

Expiration of the geographical frontier has not stopped Americans from relocating for a better life, and travel to see and experience the nation’s wonders only increases as years pass. A modern version of Gast’s “American Progress” would have to include busy highways, jet planes, and photographers and artists documenting the dramatic scenery. A 20th century wanderer was troubadour Woody Guthrie, whose footloose nature sent him across the country, and whose musical talent

gave us many songs. “So Long, Its Been Good To Know Yuh”, sometimes called “Dusty Old Dust” was inspired by the 1930s Dust Bowl on the High Plains and expresses the impermanence and motivation of the pioneer. The chorus:

“So long, it’s been good to know yuh, So long, it’s been good to know yuh; So long, it’s been good to know yuh. This dusty old dust is a-gettin’ my home, And I got to be driftin’ along.”

America’s actual frontier has been replaced by metaphorical ones. In August of 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed amendments to the 1935 Social Security Act, saying “There is still today a frontier that remains unconquered—an America unreclaimed. This is the great, the nation-wide frontier of insecurity, of human want and fear. This is the frontier—the America—we have set ourselves to reclaim.” President John F. Kennedy defined the “New Frontier” facing the nation in 1960 as one of “unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats” beyond which were “uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.”

The frontier of space has moved from the moon to exploration of Mars, to space stations, to black holes, to the discovery of new moons, planets and solar systems, farther and farther distant. Children and grandchildren of those who played cowboys and Indians as youngsters were encouraged by television and movies to imagine being “Lost In Space” or involved in a never-ending “Star Trek”, even defying gravity. Being “lost in space” takes on new meaning when we can instantaneously and effortlessly send and receive messages and pictures and access information, seemingly through the air; often preferring to “tweet” and “twitter” with others who are not present in our actual physical space while giving little attention to those who are.

The frontiers of science and technology move more and more rapidly. American science advances through research in many places

throughout the nation, but technology has clustered in California, in Silicon Valley, and in Seattle. It seems appropriate.

Westward tilt, indeed.