

## *What Is The West? by Adam Stetson*

It seems to me that a large part of the challenge in defining “The West” can be ascribed to its ever changing character and boundaries. In 2004 it is easy to forget that in 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president as a “western” candidate, or that in 1820 anybody brave or crazy enough to live west of the Appalachians was considered a “westerner”(and of questionable character or judgment). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Mississippi River was fairly well established as a boundary between east and west; it had been the border of the Louisiana Purchase and the embarkation point for Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery, and yet this convention was contentious, as the identity of “westerner” became, more and more, a term identified with “Rugged Individualists”, “Non-Conformists”, and those seeking to escape the crowded, dirty, and impersonal confines of the increasingly urbanized and industrial life in the east. Can one really define the drudgery and tedium of life on a subsistence farm in western Kansas or eastern Colorado as analogous to the arduous but flexible and unencumbered life of a Rocky Mountain trapper of the same period? At what point does the Missouri of Daniel Boone (unquestionably one of the first “Westerners”) give way to that of St Louis Merchants poised to profit from the burgeoning western movement, and does that change the definition or the geographical delineations of “the West”?

Ask any random group what the west means to them, and you will hear words like “Freedom” and ‘Liberty”, often in concert with phrases such as “Live and let Live” and “Elbow Room”. People often mention “Wide Open Spaces” and one western state is known far and wide as “Big Sky Country”. All of these are appropriate associations, yet they seem inadequate to the moment when one truly reflects upon what the American West is, let alone what it “means”.

It is undeniable that the American West is a place of inspiring beauty, where people have sought(and sometimes found) both amazing material rewards, and more ethereal, spiritual gains, but it is also a place of

mean little mining towns, defined by greedy uncompromising men, bent on extracting whatever they can from both the land and the people. It is a land of range wars, and fenced and guarded water holes. It is a history of crooked land deals and broken treaties, of “relocation”, and “redistribution” resulting in the enrichment of a few at the expense of the many. It is a place that suppressed dissent or resistance ruthlessly and without remorse. The History of “The West” ignores both indigenous heroes and imported ones. It glorifies Columbus and Custer while devaluing or ignoring those it murdered, debased, or co-opted. The litany of sins is far too long to cite in full, but we will here remember Crazy Horse, murdered in captivity after surrendering under promise of clemency, Geronimo and his Apache comrades, hounded into starvation in the “worthless” plains and hills of south Texas and northern Mexico, and Big Foot, dead in the snow of Wounded Knee, a “good” Indian leading his people back to the Reservation as ordered, but massacred nonetheless, alongside defenseless women and children. And Native Americans and their leaders were not the only victims. In the labor struggles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most radical leadership often emerged in the west and was routinely repressed. The laundry list of victims is obscured by years, but labor historians and lovers of freedom should always remember Joe Hill, an IWW (International Workers of the World/ Wobblie) organizer, executed in Utah for a murder everyone knew he didn’t commit, and the victims of the “Ludlow Massacre” during the “Colorado Mining Wars” of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Frank Little another wobbler murdered in Butte, Montana after repeated efforts to prevent his organizing of local miners, and overt threats against his life.

The details of these conflicts are too complicated and obscure to recount in the space allotted, but the implication should be clear: The west, and westerners, would be would need to be first “subdued”, and afterwards, “controlled” in order to ensure that America’s “Manifest Destiny” would be fulfilled. This is, in my eyes, a great irony: We continually glorify the “Wild West” and the freedom it represents, and yet all we ever seek to do is “tame” it. The eastern establishment has always viewed the west as a resource to be exploited, and

its population as either an impediment to this (native people), or just another resource (both American and immigrant workers).

The term “wild west” brings us to another set of ideas necessary to my understanding of the American West, they are the interrelated concepts of “Adventure”, and “Commitment”. These ideas are inexorably linked, in that one cannot truly be said to have engaged in an “adventure”, unless one has fully “committed” oneself to the endeavor. This confluence can be seen as early as the Louis and Clark expedition. The Corps of Discovery set out up the Missouri River with no clear idea of what they would find, but with the understanding that once they had gone so far, they were “committed” to the endeavor, entirely dependent on themselves, their comrades, and the whims of fate. Beyond rescue or salvation.

The idea of commitment in the quest for adventure is alive and well in the American West in the pursuit of “Adventure Sports” (Preferable to the overused and over dramatic “Extreme Sports”). Whatever your activity of choice, be it big wall climbing or skiing avalanche terrain, horse packing or snowmobile touring, Paragliding or peak-bagging, the imperative is the same: Don’t Fuck Up!! Once you pass a certain, identifiable point, you ARE COMMITTED. Even a minor mistake or miscalculation can mean real consequences: Injury, even Death. This was true for Lewis and Clark in 1803, it was true for John Wesley Powell in 1869 when he explored the Canyons of the Colorado River for the first time, and it is true today for my friends and me, when we venture into the wilds of the Colorado high country. The understanding and acceptance of this reality is a defining difference between those who truly embrace the western ideals of freedom and personal accountability versus those who want the rush without the responsibility. This distinction is simply illustrated by an anecdote which, I swear by all that I hold sacred is true; Overheard at the trail head of a challenging, but not arduous national forest trail: “I can’t believe they didn’t post a sign that said, Hike at your own risk”. This person was not a Westerner. He might well have lived in the west, Phoenix, quite probably, but he was decidedly not a product of “The American West”, at least not the one I want to be a part of.

One could make the argument that the western ideal represents both the best, and the worst, of the American character: Its people tend to be tolerant, compassionate, independent, cooperative, generous, self-reliant, fair-minded, and kind. Its institutions (BIA, AEC, BLM, USFS, etc., etc.) are inclined toward extractive, exploitive, wasteful, unilateral, and shortsighted approaches to both the land and its population (white and non-white).

For many Americans, and most of the rest of the world, the “West” is a place of inspiring vistas and heroic individuals, an unsullied landscape full of mystery and opportunity, populated by proud, honorable, men seeking to bring order and civilization to a wild land. This is the vision given to us by the “Western Romanticists”: Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, Frederick Remington, John Ford and their ilk. It is a world in which white people and “economic” improvement, are always good, and red people and their “primitive” way of life are, nearly always, bad. To characterize this view as narrow minded and Eurocentric hardly begins to address the fallacies and omissions of the position, yet it persists with the tenacity of a burr, clinging doggedly to the cuff of the American consciousness, even as we strive to more clearly define and understand what it means to be a “Westerner”.

From this incoherent and conflicting jumble of ideas, experiences, and ideals, we get our concept of the American West: The great paradoxes of American life, Freedom and Repression, Opportunity and Deprivation, Appreciation and Exploitation, Tolerance and Conformity.

As our population becomes more mobile and our society more homogeneous, it could be argued that this is more a question of philosophy than region, “western” values, like self-reliance, appreciation for natural beauty, honesty, and hope for a better life, can be found on Vermont homesteads and remote hillsides in Appalachia as easily as they can on a Montana cattle ranch or a Colorado ski resort, and the urbanization of the west is all around us, but we need only look to the poets for a clear expression of the difference between the priorities of an “Easterner” and those of a “Westerner” in the Modern Age. In the 1970’s a songwriter named Michael Burton posed this lyrical question in his Night Riders Lament.

“Why do they ride for their Money?  
Why do they rope for short pay?  
They ain’t getting no where  
And they’re losin’ their share  
They all must be crazy out there.”

This carries the obvious inference that anyone who rejects the “Eastern” values of material accumulation, and the associated “security” and “stability” is, by definition, lacking in some basic human instinct. Burton’s retort is, to this writer, most eloquent, and I hope, self explanatory:

“I guess they’ve never seen the Northern Lights.  
They’ve never seen a hawk on the wing  
They’ve never seen the spring hit the great divide.  
And they’ve never heard old camp cookie sing.”

It seems contrived to fall back on clichés when discussing something so intrinsic to the American character, but after much earnest reflection, the best that I can say with any certainty about the nature of the American West is that although I can’t adequately explain or describe it, it exerts great influence on the American psyche, and, with a little luck, you’ll know it when you see it, or not, mores the pity.

Always remember to look west at sunrise and east at sunset once in a while: everything is a matter of perspective.