

Balancing the West: Mythology, Economy, and the Reconciliation of Old Patterns

By Brandon Schrand

My great-grandmother Bessie was born in the back of a wagon on June 5, 1902. It was the year of *The Virginian*, two steps into a new century. Nearly a decade earlier in his Frontier Thesis, Fredrick Jackson Turner called for last drinks and dreams before he closed the door on the Western experience. People like my great-great-grandparents, John and Kate, however, weren't impressed by such a proclamation, if they ever heard of it. They wagoned around the West, regardless, for twenty-six years in the throes of hunches and hopes. Kate bore thirteen children in as many camps and settlements along the way, hoping that each move would be their last. Bessie, the tenth of thirteen, came broad-shouldered in the middle of the night, in the middle of Teton Pass, en route to Jackson Hole. Hers was a transitory birth. Like Wallace Stegner, Bessie too was "born on wheels," both literally and figuratively (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 201). Years later she would marry a man enamored with what Larry McMurtry calls the "cowboy's dream" (100). He galloped after sunsets and pots of gold and promises, promises. And one day he forgot to gallop home.

The story, of course, is not unique. It's the old story of the seeker and the nester, of roots and rootlessness. In many ways it's the story of the West. It's the story that undergirds much of Stegner's work. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Bruce Mason ponders the phenomenon of wagon tramps and home-builders. "Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there" (460)? So what is to account for the pattern of seekers and nesters that has shaped, for better and worse, the American West? Was it merely economics, dreams of wealth unimaginable, that drove families from one sagging town to the next? Or is there something more quixotic at the heart of this pattern, something that hinges on our primary mythology? Perhaps the tensions between those who roam and those who stay arrive out of both economics and mythology—two cultural indices that inform who we are and where we're from.

The pursuit of the boom and the reality of the bust, after all, find their own roots in the thick underbelly of our Western mythology. For generations Westerners

believed that the land was for their taking, that the West was their dominion, and that providence was a given. But it was failed reasoning. The Jeffersonian Yeoman's dream, overtime, rotted within and fell into a series of nightmares we call depressions, recessions, and panics. "One of the most striking characteristics of the myth of the garden of the world," Henry Nash Smith once told us, "[. . .] is it's vulnerability to economic disaster" (188). Families like Stegner's learned the hard way that rain doesn't follow the plough, and the homestead—the paragon of upward mobility and Manifest Destiny—as it turns out, was little more than a house of cards.

Despite misfortunes, broken promises, and miscalculations, though, the American West filled with people—people like my great-great grandparents. Desert gardens bloomed. Poplars lined wide streets. Canals crisscrossed sagebrush plains. Still, the West had grown into the shadow of its own symbolism, and adherence to that symbolism has caused real problems, many of which are at the heart of the "boomer" and "nester" legacy.

We cannot begin to remedy that discord between the boomer and the nester, however, until we rethink the Western mythology that led so many of us, and continues to lead so many of us down the troubling trails of our own misfortune: overgrazing, rural collapse, extractive industries, vanishing lands, and polluted watersheds. "In the American West," writes William Kittredge,

we are struggling to revise our dominant mythology, and to find a new story to inhabit. Laws control our lives, and they are designed to preserve a model of society based on values learned from mythology. Only after re-imagining our myths can we coherently remodel our laws, and hope to keep our society in a realistic relationship to what is actual.
(64)

Our governing mythology, Kittredge tells us, is linked to our laws and by extension our economy. And until we can "reimagine" this way of thinking, we will recapitulate our mistakes leaving an otherwise unnecessary burden on the West's future generations.

To live in the West today is not an all-or-nothing proposition when it comes to industry and the environment, to the paradigm of the drifter and the nester. Living in the West has always been a balancing act. We balance (or attempt to balance) water, wildlife, and wild places. It's when we lose sight of that balance and decide to gallop after a sunset, an immediate profit margin, that we begin to echo the boomer-nester legacy, that we begin to drift into the backwater of our "dominant mythology."

Wyoming is a living example of the boomer nester phenomenon, and the need for economic, cultural, environmental, and human balance. Today

Wyoming—the least populated state in the lower forty-eight—boasts a cash reserve that places their economy in the black, while other Western states continue to fight budget cuts. It's no secret that their flush economy comes not from agriculture (which contributes an anemic 2% of the state's revenues) but from coal mining and other extractive enterprises (Krza 16). A flush economy this year means little for the bigger picture. As Governor Dave Freudenthal has stated, “[Wyoming] hasn't invested in an economic future that works” (Krza 15). If there is one thing we have learned about extractive, non-renewable resources it's that they create only the illusion of stability, and it's an illusion that is well-matched by the mythology that allows for them.

Another problem that haunts sparsely populated states like Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho is the growing concern of what is being called the “youth exodus.” Young people between the ages of 18 and 35 are filing out of these states for many of the same reasons that boomers roamed the West at the turn of the century: they're looking for something better. Few want take over the family ranch because they know what that means. They would be inheriting debt and a business that is collapsing under the weight of monopolistic, globalized agri-giants. Fewer still desire to stay home and work in the coal mines. And many of those who set out for college apply to schools out of state. Worse yet, out of those who attend state-funded schools, some “50 to 75 percent leave [Wyoming, for instance] looking for work” (Krza 15). The lack of a diversified economic base, coupled with a dwindling population, and a dependence on extractive, non-renewable industries are indicators that spell out a state, if not a culture, alarmingly out of balance.

There's also a problem within the problem. The young people who are leaving these states are going *somewhere*, and if we are to believe current national trends, many of those in the exodus are relocating to the coasts. In “The New Continental Divide,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Michael Lind notes that “the coasts are rapidly filling up. Although coastal counties occupy only about 17 percent of the territory of the contiguous United States, they contain about 52 percent of the nation's population.” Connecting this coastal population swell to the American West, Lind writes that “[a]lready more and more of what early Americans called ‘the Great American Desert’ fits the nineteenth-century definition of frontier territory: an area with no more than six inhabitants per square mile” (86). While most of this trend is linked to the plains states, its influence is spreading into those states west of the hundredth meridian. And it is a trend that doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon.

So what, really, can be done to reconcile this discord between the roamer and the nester, and those larger cultural concerns that it informs? In addition to rethinking our primary mythologies, we need to learn the history of our place in the West, the history and stories of our states, and our communities. We need to understand, for instance, that Wyoming's boom and bust history started in the winter of 1886-1887 when ranchers lost all of their cattle to snows and wind, and the cycle has not stopped. And it will not stop until we begin to see through the lens of a balanced community. "Land is the basis for community," writes Linda Hasselstrom "but creating a successful community means . . . learning all you can from previous inhabitants. No one can live ethically or intelligently in the West without exploring the history and knowledge of our forerunners" (51). The third thing we need to do to reconcile this pattern relies strictly on economics and policy—ideologies that cannot change until the mythologies that govern them are changed first.

One viable piece of legislation that might help "heal the marriage between the boomer and the nester" comes from our plains neighbors to the east. Two Midwestern senators have proffered a possible solution to the ghosting of the heartland. Byron Dorgan, D-North Dakota, and Chuck Hagel, R-Nebraska have drafted a bill that is new twist on an old idea(l): "The New Homestead Act." Essentially, this throwback to the 1862 act that was supposed to bolster the Western movement 160 acres at a time, is designed to entice college educated business-minded thirty-somethings (boomers) to move into the heartland and set up shop. The booty? Tax credits, halved student loans, and "special savings accounts" for home buyers (nesters). Unlike its 1862 grandfather, this Homestead act does not guarantee 160 acres upon which the "new pioneers" must "prove up," but it does suggest that, as Senator Dorgan puts it, "The heartland is worth saving" (Standish 5). And so is the West.

Adopting similar, community-minded policies could go a long way in balancing the West's cultural, environmental, economic, and human enterprises. Negotiating these kinds of policies seems central in the challenge to secure a workable, sustainable future. Tomorrow's generation demands that we uphold Aldo Leopold's charge: to see our land as a community not as a commodity (xviii). Those demands, it seems, are great but they can be met.

My son, Mason, who is three, is a sixth generation Westerner, and his future demands that we continue the new and necessary dialogue that is now occurring between ranchers and ecologists, between environmentalists and loggers. His generation demands that we set aside partisanship, ideologies, mythologies, and

bickering, and start making wise, community-based decisions. His generation relies on the assumption that we are smart enough to know our history and that we're smart enough to avoid repeating the pattern of the boom and the bust. His great-great-grandmother, Bessie, may have been "born on wheels" but he wasn't, and his children shouldn't have to be born in transit either.

When *The Virginian* was published in 1902 it came to typify not just Wyoming where it was set, but the romantic West and the mysterious cowboy-boomer who puts down roots. And it is no small irony in how the book ends: "But the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian's where the coal was. By that time he was an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired" (316). Like the Virginian, my family also settled (finally) in Wyoming. Unlike the Virginian, however, my family earned their living in skilled trades. They were a family of carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons. They were, in a very real sense, a family of community builders—that desirable conflation of the boomer and the nester. I like to think that they lived easier on the land than the Virginian, that they lived in a geography not defined as a commodity, but a geography that we share today that is also known as Stegner's "geography of hope."

Works Cited

- Hasselstrom, Linda. "No Place Like Home." *Ranching West of the 100th Meridian: Culture, Ecology, and Economics*. Ed. Richard L. Knight, Wendell C. Gilgert, Ed Marston. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2002.
- Kittredge, William. *Owning It All*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987.
- Krza, Paul. "Wyoming at a Crossroads: Can a new governor bust the Cowboy State out of its stagnant economic corral?" *High Country News*. 17 February 2003. 35:3 (p. 1; 14-17)
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. 1949. New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.
- Lind, Michael. "The New Continental Divide." *The Atlantic Monthly*. January/February. 2003: 86-88.
- McMurtry, Larry. *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond*. New York, London, etc: Touchstone, 1999.
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. 1950. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.

Standish, Sierra. "New Homestead Act' would boost dwindling towns." *High Country News*.

7 July 2003. 35:13 (p. 5).

Stegner, Wallace. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. 1943. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Stegner, Wallace. *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. 1992. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian*. 1902. New York: Penguin, 1979.