

Stegner Essay Contest Submission

By Aaron Thompson

When I left for college in August of 1998, the plastic surgeon whose adjacent ranch my family leases told me to “take a good look now because when you come back you won’t recognize this place,” referring to the valley where my family’s ranch is located. Now, a month from graduation, I know what he was talking about.

The situation that the prompt for this essay illustrates, that the future of the West is at best uncertain, is by no stretch of the imagination new. For the last fifty years the agricultural way of life has been diseased, though it may have become terminal only in the past twenty. A number of causes can be cited: harsh climates, poor commodity prices, aridity of the region, decreasing viability of small-scale agriculture, all are possible causes. Of the excuses the essay guidelines mention, the most pertinent would be the lack of younger generations that are returning to agriculture. The excerpt from *Wolf Willow* demonstrates the problem well. Lack of opportunity combined with the prospect of someday finding yourself repairing haying equipment in the middle of the night, when other opportunities are available, makes poor incentive for young people who grew up in rural communities to stay or return. From this, it is clear the nature of the West is changing.

The direction of this change is pushing the West towards an idea that was born on the New Jersey Turnpike in the latter half of the 1980s. The idea spawned is the notion of the Buffalo Commons, and the future of the West now lies with it. The exodus from rural

areas of the West is opening up huge tracks of land that in some instances meet the federal criteria for wilderness. Simultaneously, the establishment of markets for the protection of open space is working to seal off urban sprawl and low-density development around the larger population centers of the West, such as the Colorado Front range, the Black Hills, and more scenic areas of Wyoming. Since its inception in 1987, Drs. Frank and Debora Popper's idea of the Buffalo Commons has slowly been coming true due to socio-economic reasons.

The efforts of groups like the Great Plains Restoration Council, a group working towards realizing the Commons, are unnecessary. The transformation of the West from yeoman agrarianism to game preserve is occurring not because activist groups are advocating the concept, but because of the lack of incentive for the younger generations of these agricultural communities to return to their family's operation.

As a group central to the concept, and certainly the group with the most to lose, most Western agriculturists are resentful of the fact that the idea of the Commons is pushed and pressured onto them. It seems incongruent that advocates of the Commons, a concept requiring wisdom and grand vision to appreciate, lack the necessary patience to wait for Western agriculture to draw its last breath.

The resentment of Western agriculture stems more from this restlessness by those in favor of the Commons than anything else. My people are not slow, backward, or shortsighted. They know their time is drawing to a close and that the way of life that their families have enjoyed for generations is ending. Coming from an agricultural background and knowing the type of people involved, I likely speak for the majority when I admit that

we feel the noose tightening. Most of us are not angry that someday, the land that our families have worked and loved may be a part of something bigger. All that we would ask is that we are allowed the time necessary to leave on our own accord, that our land not be taken from us prematurely. How long this might take is unclear. Not past another generation would seem a reasonable guess.

In the meantime, the West is stuck in another transition period. The fact is that the age of the current generation still farming and ranching is fast reaching retirement age and the generation that is to replace them is increasingly hesitant about returning to agriculture. An aspect that is often overlooked is the pain, guilt, and the sense of betraying one's self and family that my generation endures when they elect not to return to a family farm or ranch. This is the cost we incur when we go "hunting wider opportunities," as Stegner put it.

I am graduating from the University of Wyoming in less than a month with a degree in Agricultural Business. Most of the decisions that I have made in my life have prepared me to return home and take over the family ranch. Yet now I am uncertain that this is the right decision. I am even more uncertain about whether or not I want my children to someday be faced with the decision that now faces me. As the eldest son, I fully understand the pressures associated with land ownership and am reluctant to burden others with those cares because of my inability to break with tradition. I've bought some time from having to make this decision by taking a job with a division of Raytheon Corporation, telling my parents that it's temporary and a chance to travel. In the meantime, the decline in my father's physical ability to run the ranch is being offset by the

labor of a young man and his family who were not fortunate enough to have inherited land of their own, a situation that for me involves another moral dilemma.

I think that it is clear that Western agriculture is on its way out, to be replaced by some version of the Buffalo Commons. What is not clear is what will happen to the yeoman agrarian that has tended the land for the past 100 years.