

The Indelible West

This project was born on a summer day in 1988 while visiting my parents in Phoenix, Arizona. Driving down a street, I was suddenly struck by a thought: in less than two years the American West would be marking the centennial of the closing of its famous frontier. Photographing the *modern* frontier as a way of celebrating this landmark event would be an interesting project.

I lived in Los Angeles at the time, having recently bailed out of graduate school in film at UCLA. Needing a paycheck, I worked in the basement of the university's main library processing new books. Needing a purpose, I often wandered among the stacks of the library's extensive western history collection, where I fished, frankly, for ideas. One day I found one. I came across a small book titled *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*. Curious, I checked it out and began reading in it during breaks at work. I quickly learned two important facts: first, the U.S. Census Office officially declared the western frontier closed in 1890; and secondly, that Prof. Frederick Jackson Turner declared in an 1893 essay that this very same frontier was a defining influence on American character.

Here's what the Superintendent of the Census wrote in 1890: "Up to and including 1880, the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports."

This declaration gave Prof. Turner an idea. Here is his famous thesis in his own words: "This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. *The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.*"

Westward Ho!

I kept reading, including essays by other historians. I learned that Turner's thesis was warmly embraced in 1893 by educated audiences, not surprisingly, as the fruits of the nation's policy of Manifest Destiny were being harvested, and it continued to be supported well into the 20th century. Beginning in the 1960s, however, a new generation of historians challenged key parts of Prof. Turner's thesis, including his silence on governmental atrocities committed during the Indian Wars, the absence of frontier women in his analysis, and the role of minorities in westward expansion and settlement, among other omissions. They didn't dispute the frontier's influence on American development as much as they disputed Turner's rosy evaluation of its impact. It was an academic debate, to be sure, but one that raised interesting issues about the West and the nation.

I wasn't sure what it all meant to me until that sunny day in 1988 when a question popped into my head: what did the frontier look like today and was it still influencing our national character?

Indisputably, the frontier still existed in the American West – at least in my mind. By 'frontier' I mean the meeting-line between nature and culture as expressed on the land. It was a line that I had studied for years as a professional archaeologist, especially on survey as I walked mile-after-mile across the desert with a crew looking for prehistoric sites. Sometimes the meeting-line was subtle, such as a solitary field house hidden among trees; sometimes it

was obvious, such as a multi-story ruin or a dense scatter of broken pottery. But in all cases, the way the hand of humans touched the land was fascinating. Later, when I became active in the conservation movement I witnessed a much less subtle meeting-line, too often in the form of destructive human impacts on land and wildlife. In both cases, however, I saw that the frontier was very much alive across the West.

But the frontier was people too: archaeologists, environmentalists, loggers, tour guides, river runners, ranchers, retirees, artists, scientists, government employees, writers, miners, photographers, and many others, each engaged in their own way in that meeting-line between nature and culture.

The trouble was in 1988 I wasn't seeing this new frontier in photography books, gallery shows, or magazine spreads. Instead, two clichéd black-and-white visions of the West still dominated the public imagination: (1) unsmiling cowboys perpetually riding into the sunset; and (2) Ansel Adams-inspired pretty pictures of a human-less wilderness. The vibrant, diverse and peopled West I had come to know was nowhere to be seen. That's why the idea of spending 1990 photographing the modern frontier struck hard. It was an opportunity to be novel and creative, I thought. But I wasn't a professional photographer! It didn't matter. The idea had me by the throat, so I bought a medium-format Bronica camera and hit the road during the centennial year, weaving multiple trips across the region around my day job in the basement of the library.

When I was done, I called Wallace Stegner. In the fall of 1991, while visiting the Bay Area, I decided to look him up. I called Information. Yes, said the operator, we have a phone number for Wallace Stegner. Impetuously, I dialed it. He answered! I told him my idea about the photography book, which I happened to have with me. "Could I come over," I asked? He said I could and gave me directions. I drove right to his house and then spent two inspiring hours with him in his study, going over the images. We talked about Turner's thesis, about growing up western, and about the modern challenges confronting the region. When we finished looking and talking, I asked him if he would write a Foreword for the book, and gulped. He said he would. And six months later it arrived in my mail box.

It was an extraordinary act of generosity on his part, and I've never forgotten it.

Alas, it wasn't enough to get the book into publication. It came close, though. With the help of a free-lance editor, I signed a contract with a university press in 1993, and began to look forward to seeing the book on a coffee table soon. I should have been more careful with my expectations. Ultimately, the press changed its mind, which was its prerogative, and then the free-lance editor abandoned me, which was his prerogative too, I suppose. He wished me luck. I made a few desultory attempts to find another publisher, but without success. Discouraged, I put the book on a shelf and moved on with my life.

But the frontier still beckoned, so I didn't stop taking photographs with the Bronica until a career change in 1998 required me to start shooting 35mm color slides of cattle and grass instead. I holstered the Bronica and stopped printing images in my darkroom. The whole project, it seemed, was destined to languish – which was fine. It had been a good run.

The Internet changed my mind.

I knew from personal experience that creating an online book was possible. So, last year I dug the photographs out of the garage, blew off the dust (literally) and took a look at the project again, now twenty years old. To my surprise, it had the feel of history to it – but not the history I had intended. It was no longer a portrait the old frontier of 1890 via the new frontier of 1990 as much as a study of a modern era now gone. By 2010, the so-called 'New

West' was largely history, torpedoed by economic recession, changing values, and new political and ecological realities (such as climate change). Looking at the photos from the perspective of the early 21st century, 1990 felt as distant as 1890.

But if the images were a chronicle of a place in time, they also seemed timeless – and I don't mean that egotistically. Wallace Stegner once wrote “The Westerner is less a person than a continuing adaptation. The West is less a place than a process.” Inadvertently, I had captured a bit of this adaptation on film. In 1990, the 'New West' was in its heyday, but already seeds of its inevitable transition were visible, though I didn't recognize them at the time. The West is usually depicted as a place – mountains, deserts, forests, and rivers – not a process. But as Stegner himself demonstrated, the region's placeness is merely a stage for the saga of continuing adaptation that the West requires of its inhabitants. This idea didn't strike home until I looked at my photographs again. The process Stegner described was ongoing then and now, and a name for it is the *frontier* – where westerners continue to adapt to the West's abiding dryness, sparseness, and timeless beauty.

The West as a place and a process has created indelible impacts emotionally, economically, and culturally on our nation's people and history for centuries. They continue to change us to this day, and will never stop doing so. These impacts are ineradicable and unforgettable – a permanent mark on America, as Prof. Turner hypothesized a century ago. But Turner was wrong about the frontier – it never closed. It is still very much alive. That's because the meeting-line between nature and culture, visible on the land and in its people, is constantly evolving, expanding, and renewing itself. The photographs in this book are a snapshot of one moment in the frontier's evolution, the intersection of a time and place now gone. I hope you will find them interesting and pleasing.

Thanks for taking the time to look.

- Courtney White
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