

The Jaguar's Teeth

by Courtney White

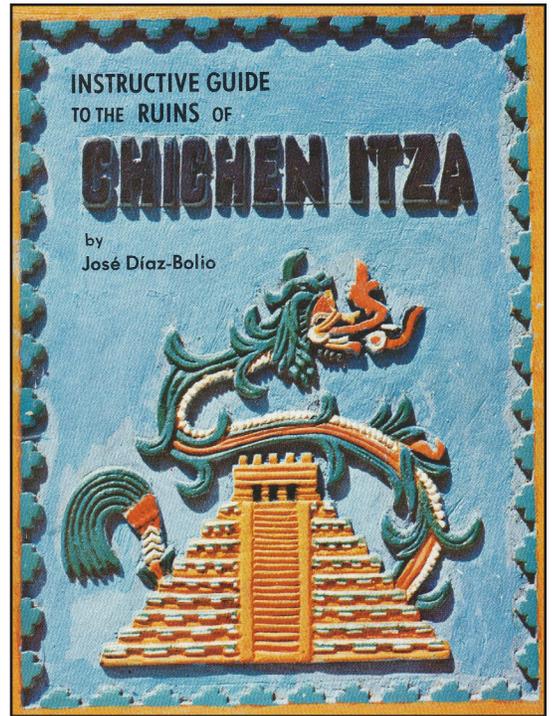
When I was thirteen, I took a photograph that launched me on a difficult path for the rest of my life.

It happened outside a stone building with a curiously rounded roof called *El Caracol* in the great ruined Mayan city of Chichen Itzá, on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. It was the summer of 1974 and my parents had signed me up for a lengthy driving tour of Mexico organized by a private school that I didn't attend, most likely to get me out of their hair for five weeks. The tour had an archaeological bent and the tenth ruin on the itinerary was Chichen Itzá. As usual, I separated myself from the rest of the group as quickly as possible, a guidebook in one hand and my sturdy Kodak Instamatic X-15 in the other. The camera was a small rectangle of gray plastic with a push-down lever for a shutter and a noisy dial near the eyepiece that advanced the film. A thin strap connected the camera to my thin wrist, which made the motion of drawing the Instamatic to my eye rather awkward. But then, at thirteen everything I did felt awkward. I had already dropped the blasted thing two or three times, chipping the plastic. My heart leaped each time. I loved my little camera—after nearly three weeks away from home, it had become my best friend.

El Caracol means “snail” in Spanish and the guidebook described it as an observatory used by the ancient Maya to track the movements of celestial bodies. *Cool*. I hadn't experienced an observatory yet and I was eager to see one. I carefully threaded my way through the sprawling ruins, following the guidebook's map like a pro. By this point on the trip, I had explored marvelous temples, huge pyramids, damp underground vaults, vast plazas, spooky ball courts, jungle-encrusted arches, quiet palaces, beautifully colonnaded markets, and solitary, starling-infested structures of mysterious function. I specially liked to prowl the periphery of a site, where the line between order (the tidy, tourist-friendly grounds) and chaos (the jungle) blurred intriguingly. It was on these rough edges that a ruined city seemed most genuine and most secretive. Exploring them stirred a romantic yearning in my thirteen-year old soul, requiring that I literally wander off the beaten path, much to the consternation of our four adult chaperones. Not that they didn't try to stop me. When their early protests proved futile, however, they threw up their hands, letting me go where I wanted.

I should have recognized it as a sign of trouble.

The yearning began during a visit to the first ruin on our trip, Tula, the former capital of the Toltec Empire, located north of Mexico City. Climbing out of our vehicles, I saw a wide staircase that led to a flat-topped pyramid crowned with tall, stony statues of human figures in elaborate costumes. I was instantly smitten. According to a guidebook, the Toltec Empire flourished a thousand years earlier. *Jesus*. Back home in Phoenix, Arizona, “old” meant anything built before World War II, including the feed store down the street that we frequented for horse supplies. I knew Phoenix had ‘risen from the ashes’ of a prehistoric village, but so far I hadn't discovered anything in town older than a ranch house. Tula hit me like freight train. I bounded up the pyramid and wandered among the statues, whose martial bearing and silent, vacant eyes



Tula (my original snapshots)

kids or the nerdy, ever-straying one in dorky glasses. When it came time to leave the museum and go back to the hotel, they granted me permission to stay longer, probably out of relief. Thrilled, I wandered around until closing time, fanning the flames of my curiosity, but also paying a price when I got lost twice on the walk back to the hotel. Worse, the door to my room was locked and I didn't have a key. I had no idea where the group was, so I drifted outside intending to find a park bench so I could read a book on the history of Mexico that I had purchased in the museum bookstore, only to be badgered by a peddler until I agreed to an unnecessary shoeshine (for *mucho* pesos).

I managed to get lost again the following day, this time during a visit to the huge ruined city of Teotihuacan. It started with a nauseating exchange of flirtations at the foot of the Temple of the Moon between my roommate and a cute girl on the tour that he had an eye on. To demonstrate his virility, he hustled to the top of the steep staircase without a pause, drawing exaggerated oohs from the girl. It made me sick to my thirteen-year old stomach, so I spun on my heel and headed for the other great pyramid in town, the massive Temple of the Sun, telling a chaperone I would be "right back." He didn't stop me, so off I went alone (ah, those were the days). After climbing up and down the pyramid's huge, endless staircase without the benefit of an admiring audience, I headed down the Avenue of the Dead to the lovely and mysterious Temple of Queztalcoatl, at the other end of town. To my delight, the sculptured heads of feathered serpents and round-eyed gods that festooned the temple were immediately recognizable—copies adorned our favorite Mexican restaurant back in Phoenix!

The world, I began to see, was smaller than it seemed.

More amazing ruined cities followed: Monte Albán, Yagul, Mitla, La Venta, Palenque, Uxmal, Kabah, Chichen Itzá, and lastly, Tulum, perched attractively on Yucatan's east coast. It was an unending feast for hungry eyes. I saw huge stone Olmec heads in an outdoor museum, lovely Mayan friezes, carved sarcophagi, and delicately-facaded temples. I climbed up broken staircases, crawled through dank tunnels, and stared wistfully at forbidding mounds of unexcavated ruins in the verdant distance. I bought fraudulent artifacts from a local "farmer," pulled a dirty shard of pottery from the slope below a decaying building, ran my hand along thick Spanish city walls, prowled local markets for souvenirs, fretted whether the crocodiles at a stinky zoo were dead or alive, swatted at a steady assault of mosquitoes (also a novelty), eavesdropped on English-speaking guides, and raised my eyebrows when I learned that one of the chaperones had to bribe a Mexican policeman in order to leave the scene of a traffic accident. In between, I read in my history book and ignored the teasings of the other kids who seemed as relentlessly focused on beer and smooching as ever. I also took photos, lots and lots of photos.

The traffic accident caused us to miss the important Mayan center of Uxmal, much to my disappointment. We arrived at the ruin a few minutes after closing time, which made me quietly angry (we were habitually late to things, usually because the other kids were such sleepyheads). Sensing my indignation, one of the chaperones kindly volunteered to return to Uxmal the next day, which they had scheduled as a layover in Merida, Yucatan's capital. Who wanted to go, he asked? I raised a hand, of course, as did my roommate. Two other kids wanted to go as well. *Great!* The trip was on. Stoked, the following morning I rose early and went searching through the streets of Merida for a tour company that would take me to the Mayan ruins of Labna and Sayil, which I desperately wanted to see as well. I sought a half-day outing, figuring there would be plenty of time to see Uxmal in the afternoon as planned. I was certain the chaperones would let me go, and if no one else wanted to come along, I'd go by myself. I found a guided tour with a company and triumphantly beelined back to the hotel—where the chaperones scotched my plan *muy pronto*. I was disappointed, but at least the search itself had been educational.

I learned I could seek and find things on my own.



Palenque



Uxmal

Uxmal was amazing. Once released from the car, I climbed straight up the towering Pyramid of the Magician, clutching the heavy chain that officials had placed on the stairs for us unsteady tourists. The view from the top was heart-stopping. Built during the Mayan Classic Period (circa 900 AD) out of lovely yellow stone, Uxmal became a major administrative center for the region with an architectural style that was both unique and beautiful. For a time, the city prospered and grew fat. Then it fell to conquering Toltecs (from Tula!) who subdued the entire region within a few short decades. Soon, the entire Mayan civilization collapsed into nothingness. *Yipes!* According to my history book, the reasons for the collapse were shrouded in mystery, creating one of the great enigmas of archaeology. Questions filled my mind as I wandered through the lovely ruins. What happened to the

Maya? How could a large, complex society crater so quickly? How could a place like Uxmal be abandoned like that? Where did everyone go?

Uxmal mesmerized me with its mystery and quiet beauty. After taking too many photographs of the stately Governor's Palace, I decided to head over to the House of the Doves. I didn't make it. "I wanted to get over to some buildings," I wrote later in my journal. "I found a path, so I followed it. I did not have any bug spray and I was sorry. Bugs attacked me from all sides. It started to rain, so I hid in a temple in the cemetery group... The ride back [to Merida] was done in rain and overcast skies. They talked about beer most of the way."

Uxmal had pushed my adolescent yearning up a big notch. On the drive back, I closed my eyes and wished with every ounce of my teenage heart that the jungle would magically lift, just for a moment, revealing hidden ruins—and answers to my questions. I squeezed my eyes tight, concentrating. I didn't want fame or fortune. I wasn't looking for Mayan gold or Spanish treasure. I just wanted to *know*. What had happened out there, in the thickness of the jungle? I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. I tried again, praying earnestly to a deity, any deity, for a quick peek under the jungle, asking it to lift it like a vast green rug. I opened one eye. Nope. I tried again. No go. I sighed. I knew I was being childish. I suddenly felt embarrassed and scanned my fellow passengers. No one had noticed my prayerful behavior. As I turned my gaze back to the leafy foliage zipping past us, embarrassment gave way to disappointment. There were no shortcuts to answers, I suspected, no accommodating deities available to lift jungle rugs. I settled in for a doze. Our next stop was Chichen Itzá.

Resupplied with film and burning brightly again with curiosity, I headed into the heart of the magnificent city, aiming for *El Caracol*. Every ruined building I had seen so far was square, so when the round form of the observatory came into view, with its roof eroded at a rakish angle, I knew I needed a photograph. Excitedly, I snapped a quick one, climbed the stairs to a large platform and snapped another. Satisfied for the moment, I looked around, drinking in a marvelous view of the ruined city. *Wow*. Walking to the edge of the platform, I saw a square-shaped building a short distance away, which my map identified as the Nunnery. It was pretty, so I lifted my little Instamatic to my eye, framed the image carefully, groped for the shutter lever with my finger, and...hesitated.

Something was wrong. I peered over the camera at the building and then looked again through the X-15's tiny viewfinder. I suddenly realized what it was: the picture was boring. I had snapped this photo a hundred times. I needed a new angle. Craning my neck, I looked around for inspiration. Suddenly, I spied what looked like a life-size stone jaguar nearby, its mouth stretched wide in a silent, defiant roar. This gave me an idea. I walked over and bent down behind it so I could frame the Nunnery in the middle of the jaguar's gaping mouth. Looking through the viewfinder, I saw the teeth of the jaguar about to close ravenously on the hapless edifice. *Chomp!*

I pushed the lever down.



The Jaguar's Teeth

This experience landed me in lifelong difficulty for two reasons. First, it propelled me into an intellectual life of query and questing that has given me no rest—a situation I made far worse by attending a college that prided itself in challenging dominant orthodoxies. From then on, my curiosity had a skeptical edge, which repeatedly landed me in hot water. Second, it provided the first glimpse of a demanding Muse who would also give me no rest. By framing the observatory through the jaguar’s teeth like that, I knew that I wasn’t destined to be a scientist or anything else ‘left-brained’ despite my questions. I had artistic, right-brain energy to go along with my yearning and was destined to take a creative path through life (I know that the left-brain/right-brain dichotomy is both simplistic and controversial but I find it helpful). Where would the path lead, however? I had no clue. In fact, as I eventually discovered, I was in a tricky spot. I had left-brain questions but sought right-brain answers. These didn’t mesh terribly well, which meant the path would be rocky and hard to follow, requiring me to stop, back up, and change directions more than once. The Muse’s stern gaze also meant there would be no respite on the journey. Swing in a hammock? Sleep in late? Not likely. The Muse would disapprove. Let’s get cracking. Hup-hup! Wherever I was headed, with a click of the Instamatic’s shutter I was on my way.

*First up for the left side of my brain was archaeology, fired by my Mexican adventure, followed closely by my right-brain responses: photography and filmmaking. In fact, I put so much creative energy into image-making between 1978 and 1994 that I’ve come to consider this period of my life as the time of **Images**.*

Returning from Mexico that summer, I signed up with the local chapter of the Arizona Archaeological Society, a well-respected amateur organization. I became an active member, attending meetings and participating in an archaeological dig that the Chapter directed in a prehistoric ruin on the edge of Phoenix. I soaked up everything like a sponge. I even tried to decipher scholarly articles in the journal that the Society published. The following summer I volunteered at Pueblo Grande Museum, a city-owned archaeological park that protected a tiny remnant of the extensive Hohokam civilization, which peaked around 1400 AD before mysteriously disappearing alá the Maya. Working at a museum was a fresh experience for me. I met graduate students, participated in a professional excavation, helped to construct educational displays, reassembled prehistoric pots in the laboratory, observed the oddball staff at work, and had the pleasure of wandering the grounds alone during breaks, casting my imagination back to a long-lost era, before the mythical Phoenix was consumed by fire.

A cascade of archaeology followed, including a volunteer gig in the ceramics laboratory of the Anthropology Department at Arizona State University, where the staff was more than happy to have an energetic kid wash thousands of broken pieces of pottery for them—and I was happy to do it. This led to an eye-opening summer of ASU-led excavations of archaeological sites in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona, where I had the educational experience of watching graduate students at work and play, including drinking contests, water balloon ambushes, noisy broken hearts, and even a brief fist fight. *Wow*. I comported myself well enough through it all, apparently, to be hired the following summer by the University. The project was an archaeological survey of watersheds around Phoenix, part of a controversial process of picking a location for a new water reservoir for the city’s ceaseless growth. Whatever the bigger picture, it meant I would be paid to hike and camp. When I collected my first paycheck, at the eye-popping rate of \$3.33 an hour, I was seriously



Excavating at Pueblo Grande



On Survey with ASU

amazed. Somehow, I had managed to become a professional archaeologist by the age of eighteen!

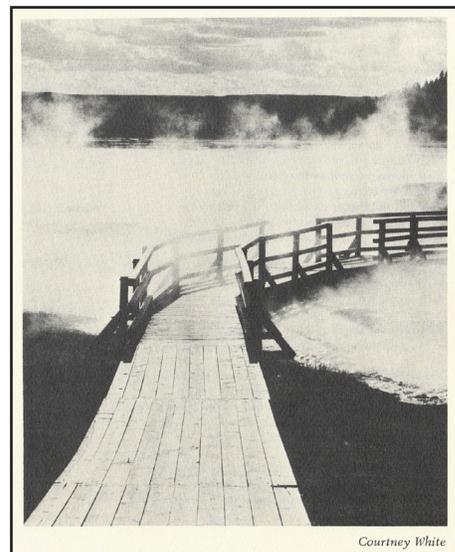
My intellectual interests propelled me to Reed College, in Portland, Oregon, a bastion of liberal arts education. It was a decision that changed my life. Reed was a deeply iconoclastic institution and I spent four intense years being trained in the art of healthy skepticism. Challenge what you're told, I learned in the classroom, including the things professors tell you. Dissent was encouraged and many of my fellow students eagerly obliged, creating a daily Socratic slugfest that intimidated and bewildered me. Pushed rudely into the deep end of an academic pool that I never knew existed, I struggled to stay afloat, earning mediocre grades in the process. Although I avoided drowning, the experience reinforced my feeling that I was no intellectual-athlete destined for an ivory tower. Nevertheless, for my senior thesis advisor I chose the most intimidating professor in the Anthropology Department and grabbed a sturdy sword for the year-long battle. In the end, I earned an 'A' for a thesis on anthropological film that was praised by my committee for its originality.

Meanwhile, my right-brain had been busy taking photographs.

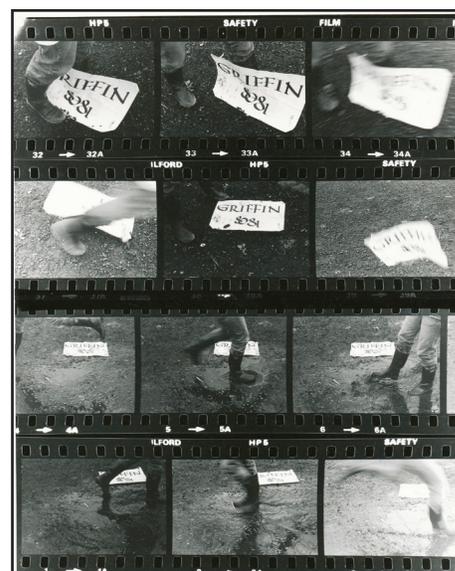
I had been an energetic photographer since high school, evidenced by the bevy of lenses, filters, tripods, and cameras I owned, not to mention my earnest artistic intentions. In 1980, the latter took a serious turn during my Junior year at Reed when *Exile*, the student-run literary magazine, published three black-and-white photos I had taken on a cross-country sojourn with Gen the previous summer. That led to a volunteer job as a photographer for Reed's yearbook, *The Griffin*, which led unexpectedly to a promotion as the publication's co-editor. All of this led to hours and hours in the campus darkroom, to the detriment of my academic prospects. Worse, I brought my father's vintage 16mm movie camera to school, which led to a spate of amateur movie-making, including a lampoon called *Gidget Goes to Reed* and two documentaries (in a loose sense) of the end-of-the-year campus party called *Renaissance Faire*—all three of which are stored in the school's archives, I believe.

In a further burst of youthful energy, I spent the following summer making a kind of music video, though shot on film and set to the music of J.S. Bach (MTV debuted on cable that August, as I learned later). The following summer, I made a sequel. Both were purely artistic endeavors and odd ones at that. I wasn't sure what I was trying to accomplish, other than tell a story and explore some filmmaking boundaries. It was entirely right-brain—I certainly wasn't trying to answer any left-brain queries. Mostly, it was a great deal of fun. For a moment, my Muse stopped tapping her foot impatiently, but only for a moment. Enthralled, I took a class in Japanese cinema the following fall with Gen, enrolled in a film editing class at an art school, hit the indie movie halls, and cracked books on film theory and grammar (irresistibly called "semiotics" by academics).

Making films, watching films, reading about film history, thinking about film theory, as well as writing about anthropological cinema for my senior thesis all pointed in one direction: graduate school in filmmaking. Enamored of Australia's New Wave of cinema taking place at the time, I commenced my search for a school Down Under but ended up moving to Los Angeles and enrolling in UCLA's well-known program instead. Enrolling in 1983, I intended to make documentaries, but shortly I switched to fiction film, a decision influenced



One of my *Exile* photos.



My cover art for *The Griffin*.



Mostly Ash and Pottery

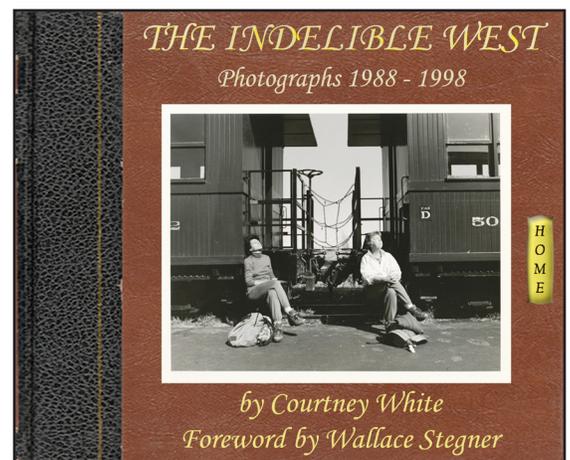
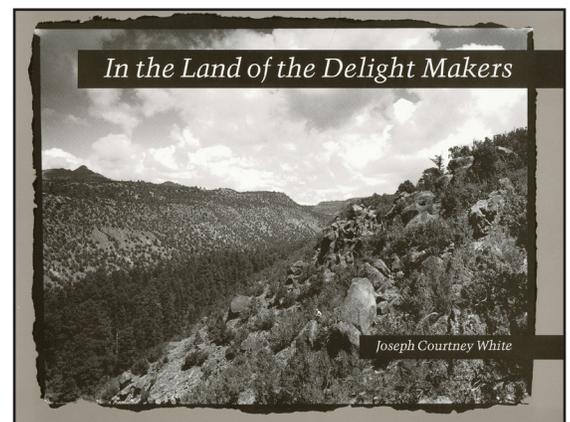
both by Hollywood's close proximity and the meager career prospects for nonfiction filmmakers. Overeager by nature, I responded to UCLA by taking too many classes and putting in too many long days in Melnitz Hall, mostly in darkened rooms. Undaunted, I poured every bit of energy and creativity I had into writing and directing a too-long and somewhat lugubrious dramatic film about archaeologists on survey in the desert titled *Mostly Ash and Pottery*. Although pleased with the final product, the effort nearly killed me. It certainly wiped out my bank account. Exhausted financially, emotionally and physically, I dropped out of school just two classes short of a MFA degree (which I regret) and took a job in the basement of the university's main library in an effort to recover my spirits and my finances.

Both took a while.

My brain hurt. I had veered hard from the ordered, left-brain life of Reed into the intuitive, right-brain chaos of film school and hit a wall as a consequence. Despite energy and enthusiasm, my path had reached an unexpected dead end. My Muse was not pleased. I felt lost. Returning to graduate school, or filmmaking generally, was not an option. I needed a new quest, one with more left-right-brain balance and less late nights. Fortunately, the answer was all around me, though I didn't realize it at first: I worked in a large library! During breaks, I began wandering the book stacks, hoping to stumble upon inspiration for the next step in my journey. I spent most of my time on the history floor, focusing on books about the American West, which I read systematically state-by-state in good left-brain style. Then in early 1988, I found the idea I was searching for in a thin book about the West's famous frontier. I learned that the U.S. Census had declared the frontier closed in 1890, concluding a significant chapter in American history, which meant that in a mere two years we would be marking the centennial of this landmark event. *Cool*. My left-brain kicked in, asking: was the frontier actually dead or had it metamorphosed into something else (as I suspected)? If it had, what was it exactly? My right-brain jumped in: let's buy a medium-format camera and find out!

It was time to take photographs again.

This decision netted two books: the first was a documentary look at a week-in-the-life of an archaeological survey in New Mexico titled *In the Land of the Delight-Makers*, published by the University of Utah Press in 1991. The second was the frontier project, titled *The Indelible West*, which garnered a Foreword by Wallace Stegner shortly before his death. In both books, I pursued left-brain questions with intuitive right-brain answers. I wasn't a professional photographer or writer, I just thought up the projects, did the field work, wrote some words, and then prayed to the publishing gods. Unfortunately, my prayers were only partly answered. The archaeology book, despite good reviews, went straight to the out-of-print bins (*Amazon* sells a used copy today for exactly one penny). The frontier project seemed destined for a happier fate. Boosted by Stegner's praise



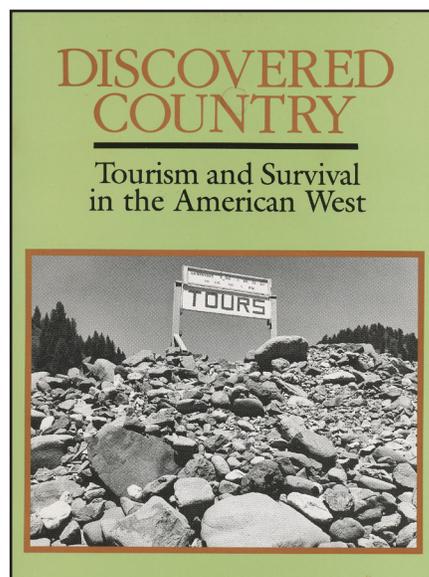
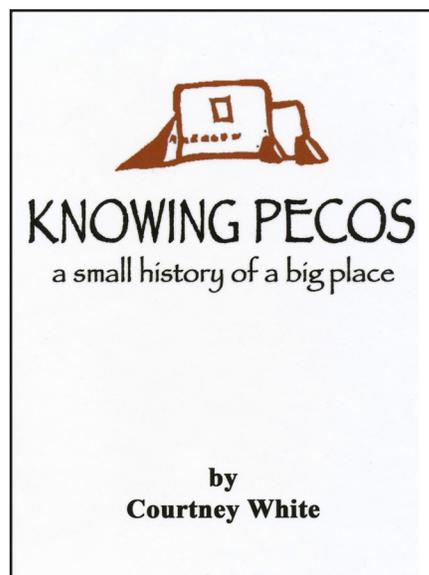
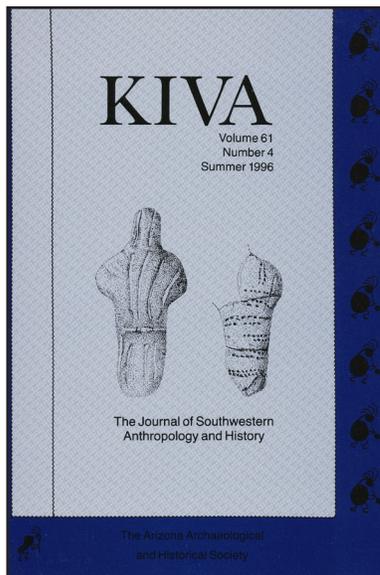
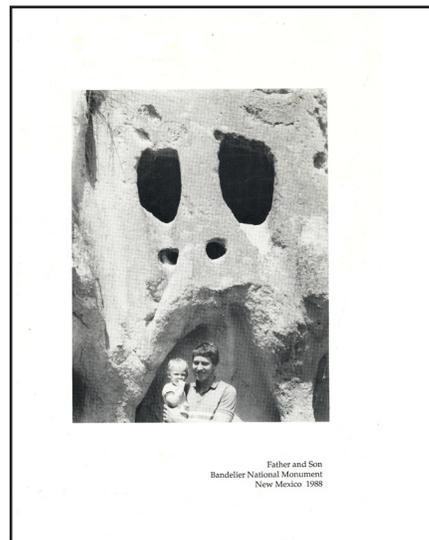
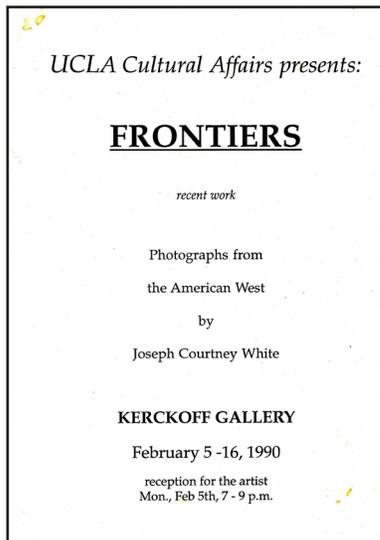
and assisted by an agent/editor, the book netted a contract with an academic press and nearly made it into print. Nearly. A last-minute rejection by the press followed by a quick-as-lightning abandonment by my agent/editor, stopped the project in its tracks. It crushed my spirits as well. Whatever photographic aspirations I harbored from my Instamatic X-15 days, despite some moderate success, evaporated into thin air.

It was time to move on.

In 1991, Gen and I relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, so she could accept a position with the National Park Service. Following her example, I took a seasonal job as an archaeologist at nearby Pecos National Historical Park, which propelled me backwards in time professionally for a while. Happily, I stumbled into a fascinating research project at Pecos that engaged both sides of my brain productively. The left-side aspect, involving colored adobe bricks and architectural sequencing in the park's Spanish colonial ruins, resulted in a published paper in a peer-reviewed archaeology journal and netted me a presentation at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (and a trip to New Orleans!). At the same time, my Muse demanded attention from the right-side of my brain, so after my final season at Pecos in 1995, I wrote a memoir-ish book about my experiences. However, it was rejected by a publisher as well, so I put it on a shelf, right next to the frontier photography book, and moved on—way on.

That's because on November 8, 1994, my world had changed dramatically.

That's the day Rep. Newt Gingrich and his co-conspirators staged the "Republican Revolution" in the mid-term Congressional elections, vowing to overturn a generation's worth of environmental legislation among many other cherished aspects of our democratic heritage. Fearing the worst, I called the local office of the Sierra Club the next day and signed up as a foot soldier in what I suspected was going to be a bruising fight. I had been a member of a handful of environmental organizations since my Reed days and conservation interests could be found in a variety of my creative projects (including a screenplay that I wrote about a mysterious bombing of a timber mill in Alaska), but I had not been active in the movement—until now. It was time to get off my butt. Soon, I was lobbying





legislators, writing op-eds, attending meetings, and organizing workshops, among many other projects. All this activity was part of a larger effort to turn back a rising anti-environmental tide in the nation and although I didn't fully realize it at the time, it signaled a new phase in my life.

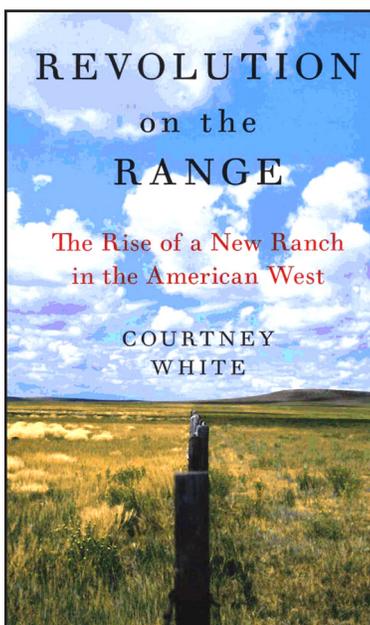
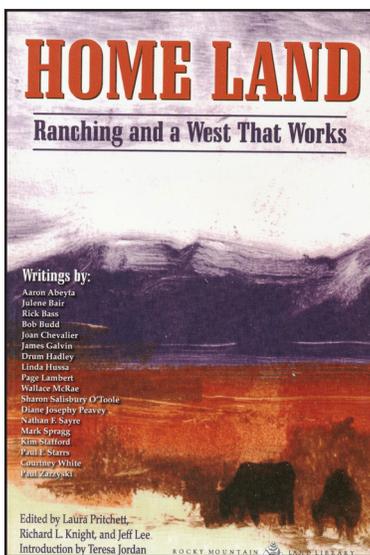
This phase took a big step forward in 1997 when I co-founded the Quivira Coalition with a rancher and another conservationist. Quivira was our attempt to answer an anguished question that loomed large at the time: why didn't environmentalists and ranchers get along better? In theory they shared many of the same hopes and fears: a love of wildlife, a deep respect for nature, an appreciation for a life lived outdoors, and a common concern for healthy water, food, fiber, and liberty. That was the theory, anyway. The reality was that by the early 1990s environmentalists and ranchers, along with loggers, federal land managers, elected officials, private citizens and others in the American West, were locked in a bitter struggle with one another, exemplified by two popular bumper stickers of the era: "Cattle-free by '93!" shouted one. "Cattle galore by '94!" retorted the other. It felt anguished because this fight had all the hallmarks of a tragedy. Both sides, and all of us in between, seemed destined to lose what was most valued by everyone—the health and diversity of the West's wide open spaces.

The left-hand side of my brain now became fully engaged in conservation, followed shortly by my right-brain response: the Quivira Coalition. The Big Picture aspects of this new work plus the creativity involved in starting and directing a nonprofit organization led me to label this sixteen-year period of my life as the time of Ideas.

My new duties meant that my left-brain now wrestled with a steady stream of important but anguished questions: What else could we do to heal relationships? Why was the land in such poor shape? Why were humans messing up the planet so badly? At the same time, Quivira was a creative endeavor that allowed me to write, take photos, give talks, and think of new projects. It was exactly like exploring a new land—which is what *Quivira* designated on old Spanish maps—requiring both logical thinking and planning and gut intuition and creative energy. In the beginning, we flew by the seat of our pants which was exciting and terrifying in equal measures. Eventually, we learned to fly pretty well—and the view was amazing. Best of all were the incredible people we met along the way, including ranchers, conservationists, scientists and agency folk, some of whom I tried to capture in my book *Revolution on the Range*, published in 2008.

Meanwhile, Gen and I were blessed with the births of Sterling and Olivia, quickly teaching us that parenting is perhaps the most challenging left-brain/right-brain experience of all!

It was an amazing adventure—kids, cows, camping, fixing creeks, building relationships, growing an organization, making a difference. Much of this period in my life has been chronicled in various places, so I won't go into the details here.





With Quivira, my left-brain/right-brain needs balanced each other productively and the winding path of my life, though no less difficult, straightened out for a stretch. Although my Muse's stern gaze did not relent a bit, she did stop tapping her foot and everything was rosy for a while. In 2010, however, three separate events converged to push me off this steady path: first, I turned fifty. Second, I was honored by the New Mexico Community Foundation with the Michael Currier Award for Environmental Service, capping a long period of hard work. Third, my carbon ranch idea made a successful debut at Quivira's annual conference, stimulating a desire to write another book. In fact, writing began to loom large in my mind, especially as I accumulated experiences from Quivira and other endeavors. The time seemed right to put these experiences into print, as well as pursue new writing horizons, so I decided to push into new territory.



*My left-brain questions today are simultaneously bigger and smaller—bigger because the challenges confronting us continue to grow (alas) and smaller because I've reached a point in my journey when reflecting on the past, in simple ways, has become equally important. Writing is the best way for my right-brain to answer these questions, which is why I consider this new period of my life as the time of **Words**.*

Not long after lifting the sturdy X-15 to my eye outside *El Caracol* at Chichen Itzá, my little journal fell silent. Thumbing through it, I was puzzled at first, then I remembered why. After arriving at a small resort on the coast of Yucatan, not far from the great Mayan ruin of Tulum, I came down with a bad fever after snorkeling in the crystal water and spent two days sweating profusely under a mountain of blankets in a thatch hut. I remember sweating *a lot*. I can also recall faces peering down at me, their expressions etched with concern. "Great," I

probably thought to myself, "now the dorky kid in glasses has found another way to be a nuisance." I can also recall a sense of unfairness that I felt. Why were none of the other kids sick? Maybe the gods were punishing me for my bouts of curiosity. In any case, when I recovered, I felt subdued for the remainder of the trip, getting fired up only once. It happened when I broke away from the group in downtown Puebla and went for a roaming walk on my own – a walk that resurrected the yearning I had first encountered at Tula. It was still there, I realized, somewhere deep inside, burning brightly. I knew it would never go away; the winding path would never end.

By time we reached Guadalajara, however, I just wanted to go home.

Looking back, I am grateful to my parents for pushing me into this exciting expedition and I have diligently cooked up adventurous road trips for Sterling and Olivia as a consequence, though without the mosquitoes and bad water. I was wrong,



however, about my parents' desire to get me out of their hair for five weeks. Looking through my little journal from the trip, I discovered a short poem that my mother tucked away toward the back, across from the Clothes Checklist (she was always doing things like this). According to her note, it was a prayer uttered by an Aztec chieftain upon his elevation to a position of leadership. I don't know why she chose it, except it reads like a blessing for anyone setting out on a new adventure. Perhaps, she suspected I was heading out on a memorable and influential journey. Maybe it was her way of saying that she wanted to go on a trip too. Either way, forty years later the words still ring true:

*Grant me, Lord, a little light,
Be it no more than a glowworm giveth
Which goeth about the night,
To guide me through this life,
This dream which lasteth but a day,
Wherein are many things on which to stumble,
And many things at which to laugh,
And others like unto a stony path
Along which one goeth leaping.*