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Article Summary: New West scholars are exploring history from the perspective of our time. Their topics include multiculturalism, environmentalism, and gender issues.

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Photographs / Images: Seth Kinman in his "grizzly-bear chair" (Mathew Brady photograph, 1865); Indian members of William F Cody's Wild West show at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition; four Solomon Butcher photographs: Moses Speece family, 1888; Chrisman sisters, 1886; Mattie Lucas; Sadie Austin; publicity still photograph of actor Pierce Lyden in a western movie; a young buckaroo ready for action in front of CWA artist Ellis Burman's sculpture "The Smoke Signal," Pioneers Park, Lincoln

Something Old Something New

Understanding the American West

By Kent Blaser

Professional historians are by and large a quiet and unobtrusive lot, traditionally given to bemoaning the lack of public interest in their work. Lately, however, several tempests have boiled over the professional teapot. Particularly notorious examples include the acrimonious debate touched off by the Columbus quincennial, the conflict over a planned Disney Civil War historical theme park in Virginia (now abandoned), the Smithsonian Institution fiasco over the exhibit for the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ongoing controversy over establishing national guidelines for teaching history in the schools (In 1995 the Senate voted 99-1 in favor of a bipartisan resolution deploring the proposal developed by professional historians and educators, and the House was considering a similar action.)

New Western History (NWH) too was brought to public attention partly by a controversial Smithsonian exhibit. In 1991 the National Museum of American Art, a part of the Smithsonian, ran a show titled "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920" that shocked some viewers with a "politically correct" revision of the traditional view of the frontier West. The exhibit attracted a storm of opposition, ranging from threats from Congress to cut Smithsonian funding to scathing critiques in the exhibit's comment book. The ensuing brouhaha made headlines across the country.¹

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The controversy over "The West as America," however, turned out to be only a small part of a much larger issue. In recent years a running argument over the interpretation of the American West has spilled over from academic conferences and journals to newspapers and news magazines across the country and even to radio and television talk shows. Nearly everyone interested in the American West has probably read or heard something about the New Western History. This essay was written to provide an introduction to a topic that has by now developed a massive bibliography. Those whose interest is piqued will have no difficulty finding more detailed reading to satisfy their curiosity.²

The contentiousness of the NWH discussion derives partly from its association with the "culture wars" and "political correctness" that have racked American society and the historical profession in recent years. For some conservatives the New West historians are just more baleful spawn of the 1960s, further examples of the radical, antipatriotic, debunking mentality of that distasteful decade. The mythological West, the land of frontier forebears and John Wayne movies, was one of the last holdouts against the corrosive postmodernism and deconstructionism of contemporary leftist intellectuals. Now even this redoubt is under siege. Current criticisms of the NWH echo critiques of the earlier generation of New Left historians of the 1960s. New West historians are accused of abandoning professional standards of objectivity, of shoddy or superficial research, of substituting ideology for scholarship, and of portraying Western

history as a "neo-Marxist doom and gloom disaster story."³

For their part New West historians sometimes portray their predecessors and critics as, at best, hopelessly out of date old fogies who have never gotten adjusted to the twentieth century, or at worst as conscious tools of a power structure dedicated to capitalist exploitation, sexism, racism, and imperialism. New West partisans have spoken disparagingly of previous generations of Western historians who substituted "clouds of myth and romance" for historical truth, who played the "subservient role of cheerleader" for "the powers that be," for "those holding the whip hand."⁴ Such name-calling does not do much credit to either side, but, if we look behind this adversarial posturing, we find a debate that has become among the most energetic and important in American history.

A "New" Western History obviously implies an "Old" Western History. Fortunately, about that there is little problem. The Old Western History centered on a dramatic, heroic story of the frontier, of westering European settlers, that has been one of the great sagas, even in many ways the central mythology, of all of American history. The idea of the West as a promised land of abundance, freedom, rebirth, and regeneration is a pervasive theme in American culture, from the writings of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson in the Revolutionary era to the art of Russell and Remington and the showmanship of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West at the turn of the century. Teddy Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* helped create the western legend,

but John F. Kennedy's skillful use of frontier mythology for the New Frontier and Ronald Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan's brilliant linking of Reagan to western and frontier themes, especially in Reagan's speech commemorating the astronauts killed in the Challenger disaster as modern day frontier and pioneer heroes, suggest that the myth is still a potent one.

For historians this powerful mythology was canonized, more clearly than anywhere else, by a man who was to become the most famous of all American historians, in an 1893 essay that was arguably the most famous work of American history. The frontier, said Frederick Jackson Turner in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," was the single most important factor in shaping the course of American development, in making Americans a different people than their European ancestors. In an earlier monumental study of American society, *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville said that Americans were a unique, exceptional people because of traits like democracy, equality, individualism, freedom, mobility, and an odd blending of materialism and idealism. Turner explained how and why this came to be. It was because of the frontier, where Euroamericans encountered a new environment and the unimaginable wealth of a virgin continent. The "free land" of the frontier made America what it was.⁵

Turner's "frontier thesis" had the merit of being extremely fecund, suggestive, and open-ended, and also of being vague enough on the details to be susceptible to almost unlimited interpretation. Turner was never without critics. His main professional rival, Charles Beard, thought the real story of America was the development of a capitalistic, imperialistic, industrial society and that Turner's emphasis on the frontier confused a sideshow with the main event. Others insisted that Turner radically overplayed environmental determinism, and that the key to American culture was the English and western—as in



Seth Kinman posed in his "grizzly-bear chair" for this 1865 Mathew Brady photograph. A frontiersman with a recognized gift of self-promotion and hyperbole, Kinman and others like him helped craft the image of the American West and its persistent legends. NSHS-PC1804

western civilization—heritage of European settlers.

Still, having said all of that, Turner is by general consensus the most influential interpreter of American history we have yet produced. His was a broadly national vision. Every part of America, beginning with Jamestown and Plymouth, had been a frontier. If there was

any one place and time that was the focus of Turner's work, it was the Old Northwest frontier of his namesake Andrew Jackson's era. But as time passed, the frontier thesis became especially associated with the later, trans-Mississippi West. For many Americans, if not for Turner himself, this was where the frontier had its most recent, prolonged,

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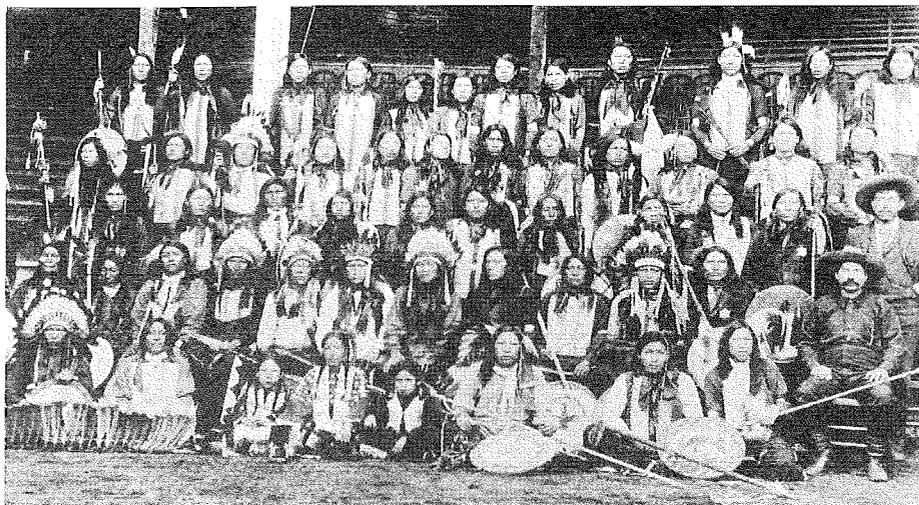


Image-makers in their own right, the Indian members of William F. Cody's Wild West show performed at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. Coincidentally it was in Chicago the same year that Frederick Jackson Turner made his influential pronouncement that the frontier had shaped American history and development. NSHS-C671-33

and dramatic opportunity to work its magic on America. The frontier became inextricably linked with the American West as the quintessential story of Western history.⁶

By the 1930s Paul Wallace Gates, Fred Shannon, Mody Boatwright, and other historians had challenged many of Turner's specific claims, while Walter Prescott Webb, James Malin, and Bernard DeVoto provided both support for and important revisions of Turner's thesis in writings on the Great Plains and mountain West. In the 1950s a stronger wave of questioning emerged. Earl Pomeroy, Eugene Bolton, and Howard Lamar, among others, argued against modelling Western history exclusively on the frontier thesis. First of all, as Turner himself emphasized, the frontier ended with the nineteenth century. Something had to be said about the region's history after that, and Turner did not provide much help. Second, a post-World War II trend in urban history, logical enough in a nation becoming increasingly urbanized, did not square well with Turner's approaches. Many westerners, even in the nineteenth century, had lived urban rather than rural experiences; in fact, the West turned

out to be the most urbanized region in the entire country. This surely raised some problems in viewing Western history through the prism of the frontier. Meanwhile, a group of historians with intellectual history and American studies perspectives, inspired by Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), began reading Turner less for literal truths about the West than as part of a massive western, frontier, agrarian American mythology.

Still, despite mountains of criticism and revision, Turner and the frontier thesis weathered the storms, thanks largely to several prolific acolytes who shored up the weak spots, adapted to criticisms, and salvaged the basic frontier emphasis. In American history in general and in Western history in particular the Old Western History, born of the frontier thesis, closely in tune with a massive popular culture proclivity and nurtured by Turner followers, still held an important if no longer hegemonic position.

Then came the 1960s. That decade began an enormous revolution in American historiography that is still being played out today. The scope of the discipline widened dramatically.

Groups that had been slighted or ignored in earlier versions of American history now attained an insistent presence: African, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Americans, other ethnic minorities, workers, the poor, immigrants, the elderly, children, gays, and the list went on. Historians also played an important role in our society's changing attitudes about itself. After the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and the riots, violence, and political assassinations of the 1960s, it was difficult to maintain the optimistic, progressive tradition of Americans as good guys who were never wrong. Americans and their historians became more critical. And by the end of the decade nascent women's rights and environmental movements added more important new perspectives.⁷

The bits and pieces of what would become the NWH began to appear in the 1960s as part of the historiographical changes just described. For a long time, however, they did not attract much attention. The initial "hot" controversies were in other areas—Southern history, slavery, and abolitionism; foreign policy, the cold war, and American imperialism. There were hard-won and important gains made in understanding the history of women, Indians, Hispanics, Asian, African, working class and urban Americans in the West. But various factors dissipated the force of these early challenges to traditional Western history. Often the scholars involved had allegiances to areas other than Western history or to departments and programs other than history, and their work was published in journals and presses outside the Western history mainstream. In any case the first challenges, typified by works like Dee Brown's popular *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970), were either absorbed into the mainstream or ignored as aberrations. So while a precursor of the NWH movement had been going on for several decades, it coexisted with traditional Western history without a great deal of friction or notice.

What has changed recently is not so

much the historians themselves, or their work, but the growing self-consciousness and assertiveness of those who now call themselves New West historians. In addition, in the early 1990s the news media realized that dissent over one of the most venerable and hallowed traditions of the American past might be a hot item. The centennial anniversary of Turner's essay and the "West As America" exhibit were focal points, but contemporary issues also focused a nationwide attention on the West: the "Sagebrush Rebellion" of the 1980s that turned from a western-centered antigovernment movement into a national landslide by 1994; Native American protests over issues ranging from Columbus and the "Custer Battlefield" to the Black Hills; the economic collapse of the western oriented energy and agriculture sectors of the economy in the 1980s; a national environmental movement that had particularly important implications in the West; conflicts over water and grazing rights; a strong western antidevelopment movement; and a notorious suggestion by two eastern academics that much of the Great Plains be turned into a "buffalo commons."⁸

In short, the centennial of Turner's frontier essay arrived in the middle of an already vigorous debate over the meaning and interpretation of both the contemporary and historical West. At the heart of the argument was a vocal group of historians, led by what was sometimes disparagingly referred to as the "Gang of Four" or "Big Four" of the NWH, who mounted a concerted assault on Turner and the "f-word" (frontier, of course!) in Western history.⁹

A good place to begin for anyone wishing to understand the NWH is Patricia Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), a key book in the coalescing of the movement. *Conquest* presented an informal and present-oriented overview of Western history, a synthesis of recent scholarly research, and an open challenge to the frontier thesis. As an alternative to the frontier as an organizing metaphor for Western history, Limerick



Propelled by the explosion of interest in ethnic and gender studies, the Solomon D. Butcher photographs of the Moses Speece family (1888) and the Chrisman sisters (1886) have been widely published. NSHS-PC204-1345 (Speece);-1053 (Chrisman)

portrayed the real story of the American West as an "unbroken legacy" of conflict and conquest and insisted that the victims as well as the conquerors were a part of the story. Related themes included an emphasis on "property," i.e. capitalism, as the most powerful force in American history, economic and political colonialism, a persistent history of

failure in Western history, industrial and class conflict on a level at least equivalent to that in the East, the importance of ethnic and religious minorities, the environmental movement, and changes in the nonhuman environment. Limerick also had a background in journalism and argued that historians should be public intellectuals addressing social

concerns rather than narrow academic specialists. *Conquest* consistently linked historical themes to controversial contemporary issues.

The notoriety of *Conquest* and Limerick's own penchant for and skill at polemical and intellectual debate made her the most visible leader of the movement, a role she parlayed into a MacArthur Foundation "genius award," one of the most prestigious recognitions of intellectual achievement available in the United States. But other historians played an equally prominent role. In 1991 Richard White published *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West*, the most thorough scholarly overview of Western history from a New West perspective and the closest thing available to a NWH textbook. As had Limerick, White presented his book as a synthesis of several decades of revisionist Western history. Unlike Limerick, White dealt with the problem of the frontier by ignoring it; neither Turner nor the concept of the frontier appear in his book at all. Instead the West was primarily an arena of racial, ethnic, and class tensions, and greed, economic exploitation, and self-interest.

Multiculturalism and capitalism replace the frontier at the center of White's Western history, but there are half a dozen other major themes as well. An ecological or environmental approach, reminiscent of Alfred Crosby's pathbreaking *Columbian Exchange*, is one. White joins other New West historians in placing ecological change at the heart of Western history, in the process making Western history the preeminent forum for environmental history. White utilizes dependency and "colonial" theories, emphasizing the pervasive role of eastern capital and the federal government in the development of the West and later the importance of the West as a catalyst in the expansion of the national economy and the national government in the twentieth century. Urbanization looms large in *Misfortune*. Almost half the book is devoted to the

twentieth century, as the West is transformed from a marginal position to a central one in the nation's economy, culture, and history, largely as a result of the New Deal, World War II, the cold war, and the economic emergence of Asia and the Pacific Rim. Finally gender issues play a prominent role in White's version of Western history. The wealth of detail and White's skill with anecdotal information make *Misfortune* a must read for a summary of NWH themes.

Along with Limerick, White is one of the best known NWH partisans. When he too received a MacArthur Foundation Award, the New Western History had surely arrived as an important movement. For professional historians, however, two other New West historians, William Cronon and Donald Worster, were at least the equals of Limerick and White in scholarly accomplishment and innovation.

Cronon, like White, began his career studying Native Americans in the eastern U.S. during the colonial era, with a pioneering work of environmental history, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983). *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) examined Western history from the vantage point of the great nineteenth-century urban center and continued Cronon's sensitivity to a combination of geographic, economic, and environmental forces in history. More than a few historians noted the double irony of Cronon's recent appointment to the Frederick Jackson Turner endowed chair at the University of Wisconsin. That a prominent New West historian would assume a position named for an old nemesis, Turner, and that the Turnerians would suffer the ignominy of having the Turner chair held by a historian whose most important work approached the West from an urban rather than a frontier perspective seemed an appropriate lesson for both sides on the ironies of fate.

Along with William Cronon, Donald Worster at the University of Kansas is

one of the premier environmental historians in the United States and one with a decidedly left and "green" take on Western history. Worster shares with Limerick an uncompromising political ideology and writing style and a commitment to contemporary issues (both are products of Yale University's American Studies Program), and with Cronon a sensitivity to the human ravaging of nature and animal rights and "deep ecology" tendencies (vegetarianism is a prominent tendency among New West historians as well as environmentalists generally). All make him a quintessential New West historian. *Dust Bowl* (1979) laid most of the blame for that disaster on human agency rather than on nature, and his subsequent *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985) furthered a tendency to understand Western history from a fundamentally ecological perspective. Worster is in addition the most unrepentant critic of Old West historians and a poignant writer of the tragic and negative side of Western history.¹⁰

A good overview of the varieties of NWH is the collection of essays, *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (1991). *Trails* features most of the main protagonists, including Limerick, Worster, and White. Worster's article in particular offers an excellent analysis of a difficult problem, what distinguishes the New West historians from the immediately previous generation of Western history revisionists, who made many of the same arguments to much less fanfare. Limerick and White define and explain the origins of the NWH.¹¹ Peggy Pascoe makes a strong argument for the critical role of women's history as the first and perhaps still the strongest challenge to the Old Western History. In addition there are half a dozen other excellent essays by historians of varying degrees of agreement or disagreement with the New West movement.

A more adversarial set of essays is *Old West/New West: Quo Vadis?* (1994). Carl Abbott, a geographer and leading proponent of looking at the West from



an urban perspective, defends that approach even though it leads towards "dissolving Western history as a separate category" of historical research (p.92). Gerald Thompson, sometimes considered a New West historian, makes a strongly critical appraisal of the movement. But the most provocative piece in *Old West/New West* comes from Gerald Nash, whose work on the West in the twentieth century made him a leading Western history revisionist, but who is also one of the most partisan critics of the NWH.

Nash's essay is polemical to a degree that seldom appears in professional writing. His unabashed attack on the NWH is closely in tune with the broader conservative position on contemporary cultural and political issues, but is pushed to an extreme degree. In a series of tenuous connections Nash ties the NWH to a philosophical and methodological tradition of "ideological history" related to Nazi and Stalinist propaganda. While disavowing any desire for controversy, he compares New West historians to fascists, conflates left and right totalitarianism into a single entity, drags "Frankfurt School" political theorists Jurgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse into the argument in a way that makes clear he has little understanding of their writings or ideas, astoundingly links the NWH attention to racial minorities to Hitler's "preoccupation with race," and makes a ghastly Freudian or typographical slip (one hopes) of referring in consecutive sentences to Deconstructionists, New West historians, and "other avid Nazis" (p.157).¹² Nash concludes with a disingenuous disclaimer that he is not attempting to smear NWH, but "merely establishing parallels that may, or may

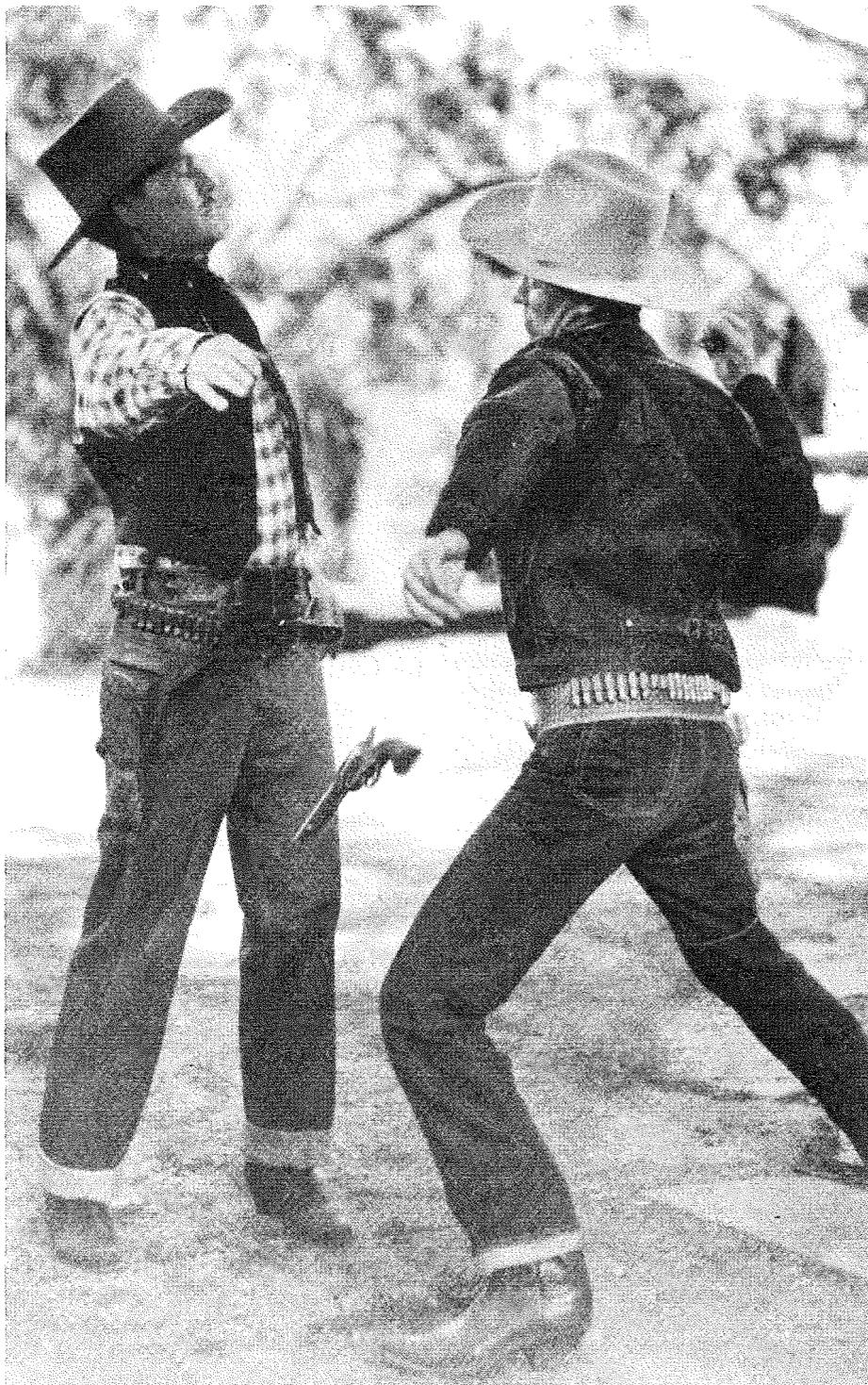
Butcher's photographs of Mattie Lucas and Sadie Austin bracket the perceptions of women in the West. Lucas was a gentle lady, who rode sidesaddle with a flower tucked neatly in her horse's bridle. Austin represented a more dynamic western woman. Well educated and an accomplished musician, she donned a split skirt to work cattle on her father's ranch. NSHS-PC204-2296 (Lucas);-2436 (Austin)

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not, be relevant" (p. 159). Neither the editor nor the press deserve much credit for letting an otherwise judicious and respected historian embarrass himself with such unsupported vituperation and innuendo, but it does give readers a chance to glimpse the seamier side of historical conflicts that seldom break through the professional facade into public view.

An equally up-to-date but less heated overview is Wilbur Jacobs's *On Turner's Trail* (1994). Jacobs is an almost ideal referee for this particular conflict. He was a pioneer in the 1960s and 1970s in both environmental and Native American history and shares much of the New West sensibility on nature, the environment, and minority groups. At the same time he finds much to admire in Turner, who was an old family friend. The first part of *On Turner's Trail* is a brief biography of Turner and a short history of the development of the frontier thesis. The second, and most original section, traces the process by which the frontier thesis, in the hands of Turner's successors, came to dominate Western history. The bitter personal feud between Frederick Merk and Ray Billington, and Billington's eventual victory as heir to Turner's mantle, not only makes good professional gossip, but helps explain why this second generation of Turnerians, more than Turner himself, has become the main target of many New West historians. Jacobs also reviews the New West/Old West feud and some of the most important NWH works and concludes with a conviction that Turner, for all his limitations, will remain a central figure in American and Western historiography for a long time. Overall Jacobs presents a detailed and evenhanded assessment of both Turner and Western historiography and juxtaposes the two in ways that help understand both.

One NWH weakness has been in the area of cultural history. At least since Smith's *Virgin Land* the cultural meaning of the West has been almost as important as its historical reality. An Old



Nebraska-born actor Pierce Lyden on the losing end of a fist fight with Kirby Grant in one of Lyden's many westerns. Courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

West traditionalist, Robert Athearn, explored the former in *The Mythic West* (1986), a wonderfully engaging book on the meaning of the West to Americans in the twentieth century. More difficult but immensely rewarding, Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* (1991) completes a massive three-volume study of the cultural significance of the frontier and brings to a close the most significant interpretation of the frontier and American culture in recent historiography.

Gunfighter Nation, which concentrates on twentieth century popular culture myths of the West, provides ample evidence to support Turner's contention that the most basic values of American society are directly related to our frontier experiences and memories. But for Turner those values were individualism, optimism, egalitarianism, democracy, practicality; for Slotkin they are propensities towards violence, imperialism, economic exploitation, and ultimately destructive and abhorrent race and gender ideologies.

For Slotkin American popular culture has been dominated by a frontier in which racial, class, and gender conflict were the chief themes, in which the adventurer/gunfighter/Indian fighter, rather than Turner's peaceful agrarian farmer, was the archetypal figure. It was this version of the West that became central to dime novel authors, to Buffalo Bill Cody's fabulously popular Wild West show, and eventually to movies and television.

One of the merits of *Gunfighter Nation* is to show how pervasive the western myth has been. Edgar Rice Burroughs, who actually enlisted in the Seventh Cavalry after the Little Bighorn, transplanted frontier mythology to outer space in science fiction stories and to Africa for the Tarzan series. Detective, gangster, and combat movies and pulp fiction were all indebted to western and frontier themes, as were the Star Wars and Indiana Jones megahits of recent years.

Slotkin is not a New West historian, or indeed a Western historian at all, but



Fifty-five riders showed up on February 9, 1946, for "Western Night" at a Lincoln movie theater. Anyone riding a horse was admitted free, and those who wore the best costumes won prizes. NSHS-M134

he is certainly a kindred spirit. At the same time, while there is a huge generation gap between Slotkin and Turner, Slotkin perversely reaffirms Turner's legacy. The frontier mattered, and still matters, even if in ways Turner could not have imagined.

The mass media have long been fascinated with the American West. (A brief example: in 1958-59 the four top rated prime time television shows were *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, and *The Rifleman*. Also in the top ten were *Maverick*, *Wyatt Earp*,

and *Wells Fargo*. *Bonanza* was the most popular show on television for much of the 1960s. Western movies, of course, have a long and distinguished role in American popular culture.) Contemporary popular culture has clearly participated in the NWH trend. The PBS documentaries "The Way West" and *The West of the Imagination* or CBS's *500 Nations*, along with other media productions, such as *Dances With Wolves*, *Lonesome Dove*, *The Unforgiven*, *Geronimo* (two recent versions), *Tombstone*, *Wyatt Earp*, *Maverick*, and *Posse*

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(not to mention nonwestern but related works like *Pocahontas*, *Last of the Mohicans*, and *Squanto*) suggest that in important areas the NWH has won the war. Much of its message has been incorporated into our popular mentality about the West. We are no longer in much danger of ignoring the fact that westward settlement included negative, even horrendous, consequences for many inhabitants or that women and minorities were part of the process. On the other hand we as a people still have a continuing fascination with the West as a place of myth, as something exceptional in America's experience. This mix of NWH revisionism and Turner-derived emphasis on the significance of the frontier seems a likely direction for future Western historiography.

A final angle on Western history may be of special interest to readers of *Nebraska History*. A strong western regionalism is a *sine qua non* of the NWH. But our concepts of national regions are constantly shifting and do not yet seem completely stabilized. Of course, all regional boundaries are murky and less than definitive, but this is a special problem with the West. Is the West defined by geography and environment, as Donald Worster argues, or by history and culture, as Richard White believes? Or is it truly defined by anything? Most definitions include everything from the Great Plains to the Pacific. But this means lumping together subregions as diverse, geographically and culturally, as the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Northwest, the desert Southwest, and California (not to mention Hawaii and Alaska). Does it really make sense to treat all of these as a single region? Even if the West was a plausible historical entity, is it a contemporary one?

Nebraska's relationship to America's regions is particularly ambiguous. Where I grew up in north central Kansas most of us thought of ourselves as midwesterners rather than westerners. The same is true of many Nebraskans (I just polled several classes on this).

There has been a surge of interest in Midwest regionalism, and Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa are the states most strongly identified with the Midwest.¹³ But there are problems here, too. The Midwest is often defined to cover a large arc around Chicago. Few Nebraskans are likely to think it logical to include them in the same region as Ohio or Michigan.

Similar problems emerge in considering another Nebraska regional affiliation, the Great Plains. Even more than with the Midwest, there has been an upsurge of interest in Great Plains regionalism. Much of the best recent writing on the Great Plains has come from non-academics, including Ian Frazier's *The Great Plains* (1989) and William Least Heat Moon's *Prairieearth* (1993). Continuing economic problems and the Popper "buffalo commons" controversy has led to a renewed interest in the future of the region ("Is the State of North Dakota Necessary?" was the headline of one provocative essay). The University of Nebraska has established an outstanding Center for Great Plains Studies, and Nebraska Public Television has produced several excellent programs on the Plains, including *The Great Plains Experience*, a six part series, and *Plowing Up a Storm*. But the Great Plains is notoriously incongruent with state boundaries. Most of the people of Nebraska do not live on the Great Plains, and a region with as many differences as Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, the Dakotas, not to mention Saskatchewan and Manitoba, also stretches our latitudinarianism.

One attempt to solve this problem involves creating a new regional entity, the "Midlands" or "Heartland," as a kind of greater Midwest. The news media seem especially fond of an expansive "Heartland" designation for a large part of the country lying between the coasts, especially in connection with disasters such as the 1993 flooding or 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. But this "Heartland" may be an even less coherent entity than "the West," even if it does re-

move the California and Pacific Northwest anomalies. Basic instincts suggest a distinction between the eastern and western halves of this huge interior region, but no solution seems entirely satisfactory.

How these matters will play out, which concepts and labels become lasting and important and which fade away, is not very predictable. But more attention on the part of historians would be worthwhile. New West historians have talked the talk on regional identity, but still have lots of work left to do in defining the West as a region and exploring regional coherence, identity, and diversity. They have plenty to learn from geographers and from historians of other regions, particularly the South, who have been studying American regionalism with much sophistication for a long time.¹⁴

And now, at last, where does all of this leave us on the topic of understanding and interpreting the American West? The most basic and important findings and approaches of the NWH, as with the historiographical revolution of the 1960s generally, are surely here to stay, and a good thing most of them are, too. No one wants to return to a history that leaves out women, ethnic minorities, or environmental changes as significant topics. NWH multiculturalism has won the field. The critical and negative ideology that accompanies NWH may be more tenuous. Whether or not Western history (and American history in general) should be interpreted as a positive, optimistic, progressive process and experience, engendered by a similarly positive, optimistic, progressive political and economic system, or whether the emphasis should be on what Worster calls the "dark, shameful" side of Western history, the greed, exploitation, failure, racism, sexism, and environmental destruction, has hardly been settled (*Trails*, p.13). But it is again not likely that we will soon return to the nearly uniform hegemony the former of these perspectives held in American history. At the very least the NWH has given the

“war against nature” and the exploitation of Native, Hispanic, Asian, and female Americans a place in the debate.

At the same time Turner and the frontier thesis may survive this assault as they have others. The New West historians are surely right to argue that the West needs to be understood as a region in its own right and not as an appendage to the topic of the frontier. But the issues raised by Turner remain important for Western history and have the enduring merit of linking the western experience to larger national and global issues. Turner is, in the end, an ally of those stressing the importance of Western history, as Limerick, Cronon, and White have all recently acknowledged.

Regional approaches to Western history open a wide range of problems concerning subregional differences and relationships to other regions, the nation as a whole, and transnational entities that Western historians have barely begun to consider. However problematic, it is hard to imagine that “the West” will not remain an important and valid concept. In much the same way that Perry Miller and a post-World War II generation of historians transformed the history of New England from the province of antiquarians and regionalists to a central place in American history, and C. Vann Woodward placed Southern history and race relations at the center of American history, the New West historians have put Western history in the middle of the most important issues in contemporary American history: multiculturalism, environmentalism, gender issues, and the basic goals and foundations of the discipline. Western history may have become controversial and contentious in the process, but that is a sign of its health and vitality. The NWH is a part of an impressive regionalist movement that includes artists, poets, novelists, scholars, and the popular media. This is a good time to be interested in Western history and in the West itself. There is no better way to explore some of the most exciting things that historians have done over the past gen-

eration, and no better time to try to understand the meaning and significance of the West for those who have roots and origins there, and for the rest of the nation too.

Notes

I would like to thank Jim Potter and several anonymous *Nebraska History* reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions, and also want to acknowledge the influence of a number of conversations with my colleague, Jim Brummels, in shaping my ideas about the West and Western history.

¹ A good introduction is Ted Amley, “The Visual Politics of the Myth of the Frontier,” *The Midwest Review*, sec. ser., 14 (1992):71-90.

² In addition to the dozen or so works mentioned in the text, a brief starting list might include: Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Gerald D. Nash and Richard W. Etulain, eds., *The Twentieth Century West: Historical Interpretations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), which contains a strong anti-New West history bias; Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); William Cronon, George Miles, Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992); John Mack Farragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), and “The Frontier Trail: Rethinking Turner and Reimagining the American West,” *The American Historical Review* 98 (Feb. 1993):106-17; Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Case of the Premature Departure: The Trans-Mississippi West and American History Textbooks,” *The Journal of American History* 78 (Mar. 1992):1380-94.

³ The quote is from historian Michael Allen, taken from a *Seattle Times* item, “New History of the West Fans Fiery Debate on Culture, Myth,” reprinted in the *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 22, 1995.

⁴ The quotes are from Donald Worster, “Beyond the Agrarian Myth,” in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner, and Charles E. Rankin, eds. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 6, 18, 22, 24.

⁵ Turner's essay is readily available in a variety of printings and editions. A good introduction is the section on Turner in Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1968), and the collections of essays in George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1949) and Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

⁶ And, in a more practical sense, at many institutions the “American West” history course was actually a course on the frontier, beginning with the colonial frontier in the seventeenth century and ending with the trans-Mississippi West in the nineteenth century. Virtually all of the standard Western history textbooks adopted this structure. See Limerick's article mentioned in note 2.

⁷ Many of these changes are lumped together under the rubric of New Left history. While there is much debate over exactly what that was and how much impact it had on the profession, the “race, class, and gender” litany, which seemed to some the “holy mantra” of the multicultural, social-historical left, moved to center stage in the discipline. Acrimonious battles erupted over the New Left's challenge to what had previously been a fairly hegemonic traditional historiography, especially in fields such as foreign policy (the history of the cold war), slavery and race relations, labor history, and much of twentieth century history generally. An early critique of New Left history was Irwin Unger, “The ‘New Left’ and American History: Some Recent Trends in United States Historiography,” *The American Historical Review* 72 (July 1967):1237-63. More balanced or positive views include a special issue of *The Journal of American History* 76 (Sept. 1989), especially the lead article by Jonathan M. Wiener, “Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980.” See also Kent Blaser, “What Happened to New Left History? Part I, An Institutional Approach,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 85 (Summer, 1986):283-96, and Blaser, “What Happened to New Left History? Part II, Methodological Dilemmas,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (Summer 1987): 209-28.

⁸ The suggestion by Frank and Deborah Popper, first made in the late 1980s in several relatively obscure academic planning journals, that much of the Great Plains had proved unsuitable for human habitation and should be returned to a gigantic Plains wildlife refuge, became a media sensation in the early 1990s. Various organizations, including the Kellogg Foundation, long interested in rural affairs and issues, the Aspen Institute, and the Ford Foundation, sponsored conferences on the idea. In the spring of 1990 the Poppers made a highly publicized tour through the Great Plains, beginning in McCook, Nebraska. Several stops involved, one suspects mostly as a publicity stunt, armed bodyguards to protect them from potentially hostile farmers and ranchers. A recent NETV documentary, “The Fate of the Plains,” recounts and brings discussion of the topic up-to-date. There were many media items on the Poppers and the future of the Great Plains, including Hugh Sidey, “Where the Buffalo Roamed,” *Time*, Sept. 24, 1990, and Anne Matthews, “The Poppers and the Plains,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 24, 1990.

⁹ The “I-word” reference has occurred a number of times in the NWH discussion, including in

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Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 26.

¹⁰ Worster's *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) is another excellent general introduction to many NWH issues. Both Worster and White have written histories of environmentalism and ecological ideas in the U.S.

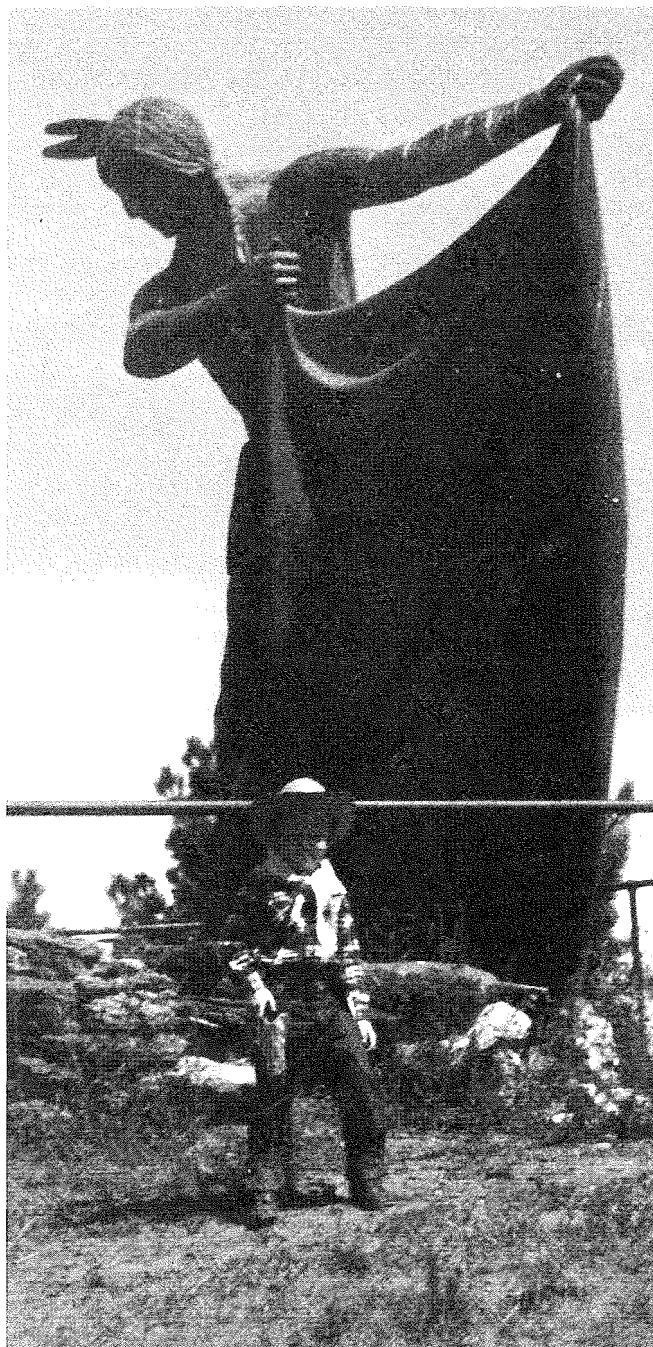
¹¹ One of the criticisms of the NWH is that it continues to beat a Turnerian horse that was killed and interred by a previous generation of historians, so that there is really little new to the NWH. In this view the "plundered province" emphasis of DeVoto in the 1930s, the twentieth century emphasis of Lamar and Gerald Nash, the New Indian History, and the New Urban History anticipated all the important features of the NWH. Worster argues convincingly to the contrary, staking out a position for the NWH that is considerably more radical than previous revisionists. Limerick has also been adept at revealing the continued strength of Old West History themes and assumptions within the profession.

¹² Nash is not the only person who has, with virtually no evidence, linked NWH to the faddish theory of literary criticism known as deconstructionism, and especially to Paul de Man, a French emigre literary critic at Yale who recently came under criticism for his association with Nazis in World War II. Even though Limerick's, White's, Cronon's, and Worster's books contain not a single reference to de Man or to any other deconstructionist that I could find, Gene M. Gressley in his introduction to *New West/Old West* says the NW historians are "enraptured" by de Man (p.13), Thompson claims they are "heavily indebted . . . to Paul de Man and deconstructionism" (p.57), and Nash has a long argument linking de Man to Nazi propagandist Alfred Rosenberg and to both the NWH and the Smithsonian exhibit.

¹³ The best recent books include: James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), a readable introduction from a geographer's perspective; James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), with a particularly strong article on Nebraska by Frederick C. Luebke; and Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), an important but resolutely scholarly and academic work on the Old Northwest.

¹⁴ Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), gives a popular, easily accessible geography perspective. A number of books and articles by Wilbur Zelinsky on American cultural geography and D. W. Meinig on American historical geography are also pertinent. To be fair to New West historians, a

number of them have taken some of the best work on Southern history as a model for NWH. Limerick explicitly stated that she hoped *Conquest* would do for Western history what C. Vann Woodward's *Burden of Southern History* did for the field of Southern history.



A young buckaroo ready for action at Lincoln's Pioneers Park, July 31, 1946. Wells and Frost, a local clothing store, commissioned this photograph to promote its western wear. The sculpture, titled "The Smoke Signal," is by Civil Works Administration artist Ellis Burman. NSHS-M134.