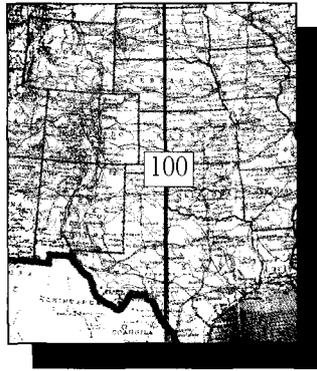

The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.



Every Man for Himself

El Paso del Norte . . . the Jornada del Muerto . . . Tiguex . . . Santa Fe: The trip that for Don Juan de Oñate was a weeks-long ordeal up the Rio Grande on the Camino Real in 1598 for me is an hour-and-20-minute flight, including 20 minutes on the ground at Tiguex (better known today as Albuquerque, New Mexico). The Franklin Mountains . . . Sierra Uvas . . . Cooke's Peak away to the west . . . the Black Range . . . the Magdalena Mountains (under the wing, the high park with the observatory at one end where Jim Rauen and I scouted for elk sign a few years ago) . . . Ladron Peak, concealing, according to legend, a quantity of thieves' gold beneath its sun-blackened folds and wrinkles . . . next, the descent into Albuquerque, step by broad step down a lurching, invisible staircase. There is just enough time for a trip back to the restroom to rub at the coffee stains in my lap with a paper towel before we're airborne again, bucking the westerly winds on climb-out as the plane makes a right turn and resumes following the river north. For miles—five? ten? twenty? it's hard to tell from up here—the Albuquerque of 2010, 2020 is platted westward toward Mt. Taylor, sacred to the Navajo Indians, 70 miles away beyond the Canoncito and Laguna Reservations: dry scratch marks on the burnt and arid desert, vast geometrical petroglyphs whose enigmatic meaning is—what? Catastrophe, I suppose, recalling the Phoenix city fathers—mothers, too—reported to have a similar grid planned as far west as the Colorado River to meet Los Angeles pushing east. I won't be around by then, of course, having gone north instead. The Jemez Mountains . . . Los Alamos, crawling with Chinese spies and sleepy American security men on coffee break . . . snowfields below now, patchy at first, then coming together and spreading north into the San Juan Mountains pushing south from Colorado . . . San Antonio Mountain, the Conejos River and the high San Juans where Dick McIlhenny, Keith Hawkins, and I nearly bagged the Sasquatch last August—ap-

pearing now, in May, like something from the last Ice Age, snowed in for the next ten or twelve thousand years. After a mere three or four generations in the air, humanity is almost totally blasé about the view from 30,000 feet. My fellow passengers sleep, drink Diet Coke, scan fat paperback novels into their motherboarded brains—except one, a Native American gentleman with his nose pressed against the window as if he might actually be seeing the world—*his* world—for the first time. The plane scrapes above Pike's Peak (elev. 14,110), clearing it by only 15,000 feet or so, and soon after is on approach to Denver International Airport on a northeasterly heading.

Viewed from 12,000 feet (or otherwise), the western hub city of Denver scarcely inspires a son of the Old West to stand in his plane seat and yell, "Yippee-yay-OH!" Built on a few dozen piles of whitened buffalo bones after the Civil War, Denver knew its heyday in the Cowtown period, the old town buried completely now beneath the glittering superstructure begun during the energy boom of the 1970's and early 80's and completed by the Colorado-or-Bust! migration of well-to-do Caliphoneyans arriving since then. Today, Denver from the air appears like a vast insect spawn on the face of the prairie, its myriad suburbs and developments laid out in an endlessly repetitive honeycomb pattern—a home for termites, perhaps, or for ants. Raised in the Dantesque environment of Littleton, Colorado, I too might go berserk (though I wouldn't waste my ammunition on teenage girls). While the "lesson of Littleton" is a complicated one, the fundamental message is that modern America has become unlivable. (Another is that white American males have no future in America and are begin-

ning to recognize the fact, but that's another story.)

Faulkner thought the American soil cursed by slavery. As if slavery were the worst thing ever to occur on the North American continent, including the destruction of the Indian peoples, however savage and cruel they might have been. Not to mention quite a number of non-human indigenous species, including the passenger pigeon and the buffalo. In her fine book *The Buffalo Hunters*, Mari Sandoz describes the virtual extinction by white hunters of the bison herds on the Great Plains—millions and millions of animals—over a period of a little less than a decade, beginning in 1876 (a year before the "reconstruction" of the defeated South ended). What happened to the Indians and the buffalo—intimately related in their mutual destruction, as they had been in their aboriginal existence—was not an accidental chapter in American history, but a preview of the modern empire emerging. The colonists arriving in America during the nearly two centuries before the creation of the United States were a different breed from the immigrants who came after 1789: the first group more settled (and settling), educated, and pious, concerned with transplanting civilization to the New World; the second rootless and rapacious, exploitive, materialist, and individualistic, interested in escaping Western civilization rather than in recreating it a hemisphere away. The colonists, being civilized people, carried civilization with them; the immigrants, less civilized, brought chaos. The colonists sought remote places in which to worship their God undisturbed; the immigrants hoped to "get ahead," "make something of themselves," exercise their precious "equality" against everyone, especially their betters. From approximately the beginning of the 19th century forward, the immigrants debarking at Boston, New York, and Philadelphia consisted largely of the European peasantry and proletariat; men and women who, whether from the country or the city, had never owned or controlled land—indeed, any natural resources at all. Released into the vast American hin-

terland beyond the Appalachian Mountains and, later, the Mississippi River, they behaved like slum kids set loose in a Mayfair confectionery shop of continental proportions. As the comparison suggests, the determining factor seems to have been class, not culture, race, or ethnicity, the late-arriving Anglo-Saxon-Celtic immigrants having acted as irresponsibly as the newer stock (or more so, Sandoz—herself the daughter of Swiss immigrants—would have said).

How does America in 1999 look to a man who has lived for the past 20 years in a small town in the least populated state in the Union, without a television set or a local movie house, and who travels mainly by pickup truck? Like Denver International Airport, I guess.

Civilization once dominated, without necessarily controlling, the world. At Denver International, nothing controls, in spite of the shiny arcades, polished floors, and all the moving parts. Wogs are everywhere—at the car rental desks, security check-in, out on the tarmac. Also crowds of lazy-looking, slow-spoken and slow-moving, ill-dressed native Americans (but neat, no stains or body odor: everyone hoping and praying to get laid tonight). If the American people are working themselves to the bone, two or three jobs apiece or so we're forever being told, why are more than 50 percent of them overweight? Americans' dress and physical condition suggest they take neither themselves nor anything else seriously, lulled in the torpor of the Mentally Homogenous State. (Mass public education really *works*, contradicting the jacket-and-tie intellectuals who claim human nature possesses a natural defense mechanism against indoctrination, brainwashing, and socially enforced stupidity.) Backlit advertising panels on the walls feature nature, children, romantic love, simplicity: Industrial America paying homage to all those things it's most intent on destroying. "How do you keep in touch with the world around you as it changes?" Thanks, but no thanks. In the news today: The Senate Republicans reverse yesterday's vote on gun control; Robert Rubin, chief architect of our national felicity, will leave Treasury in July. He may yet go down in history as the economy's Thomas Andrews, though escaping, probably, going down *with* it, as Andrews did in the case of his own masterpiece, the *Titanic*. To Hell with the stock market, our national idol. Capitalism has created an illusory world in order

to sell the real one; mass democracy, an illusory universe to sell itself. The wasteland we find ourselves inhabiting is the inevitable result.

By the time I've added the extra insurance ("bumper to bumper") the rental agency man hints I need to have in order to avoid a tolerable chance of ending up owing something like the sticker price on the car, the total amount comes to twice the charge the travel agent quoted me a month ago. It's how we do business in America today, and you give us any back-talk, we'll call security and have you taken out of here (argument being regarded by the authorities nowadays as simply an early stage in the process of going postal). In the parking lot at the end of a bus ride across what appears to be a couple of counties, I'm deposited, without introduction, behind the wheel of a Dodge Something-or-Other (Sprite? No, that's the soft drink) and a dashboard bearing no resemblance whatsoever to my '88 Ford truck's. They might as well have given me a Stealth Bomber to pilot as this Dodge Spud. (Greyish tan, elongated, and lumpy, the car resembles nothing so much as a freshly dug potato.) It takes 15 minutes to discover how to turn the lights on, and I'm launched then, into the penumbra of the coming Rocky Mountain night, the weird sci-fi landscape—not urban, not suburban—that is becoming America.

Since the collapse of antiquity, its retreat to the monasteries and feudal estates of Western Europe, the history of the West has been the idolization—and the idealization—of material wealth, against which Christianity, for one, has had a tough time competing. Alchemy—the quest to turn dross into gold—didn't end with the Middle Ages; it just changed its name and moved out of a basement address. Alchemy, not Christianity or even science, is the true history of the past 1,000 years. The New World was no sooner discovered than it became recognized as man's ultimate treasure, the Golden Continent; later in its history, gold, already idealized, became abstracted, through paper money first, then stocks and bonds, the new alchemy; the final step has been off the Gold Standard and up to the Golden Dow. That's progress, after all. And who, in our wonderfully modern, secularized, and enlightened America, has actually seen or even heard of a golden buffalo calf—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Other—confidently awaiting the daily sacrifice

on the national altars?

Modern Western culture, like every culture in history, has its momentum, its trajectory, before which Americans—now more than ever—refuse to stop, look, and listen. There's a train wreck in store along the track: our *real* rendezvous with destiny. The Civil War and its aftermath, not the Missouri Compromise, was the "firebell in the night"; having been rung so often since, it is today as cracked as the Liberty Bell. Americans, for the most part, pay no attention. Sometimes it seems that, in spite of a population of 265 millions and counting, there is no one at home in America.

The motel at the Loveland exchange is nearly deserted, but a single room costs \$50-plus. When I go for breakfast next morning it is snowing, which the manager, a Polish immigrant, isn't thrilled by. Looks good to me, though—another immigrant (from New Mexico, in this case) who's had enough sun this past 22 months to satisfy a thousand mad dogs and 50,000 Englishmen. From Fort Collins, Colorado, to Laramie, Wyoming, is a distance of 80 miles and 2,000 vertical feet through broken red hills dotted with black juniper trees, separated by grassy swales fresh and green-looking beneath a covering of wet May snow. South and northwest are the high, snow-covered mountains of Estes Park and the Snowy Range pushing up into Wyoming from Colorado. A brief halt across the state line to get out of the car, kiss the ground, and do what men so easily and uncomplicatedly do, outpacing the female sex yet again—and onward, following the snow-slick curves up to Tie Siding at the southern end of the Laramie Plain. Good grass here, real turf, and black forested mountains beyond, full of snow. The dashboard shows an exterior temperature of 41 degrees: Paradise is a cold day in Heaven. . . . More grass, a few ranches, the railroad running beside the two-lane. . . . At last, a view of Laramie, Wyoming—my new home—established on the east side of the valley against the low north-running ridge, a part of the Medicine Bow. . . . Fairgrounds, railroad yards, the tall sandstone spire of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church rising above a community of about 27,000 souls. That's too many people still, but a big improvement over Las Cruces (pop. 78,000 minus the university). In today's insane and overcrowded world, one needs to be grateful for smaller and smaller favors. c

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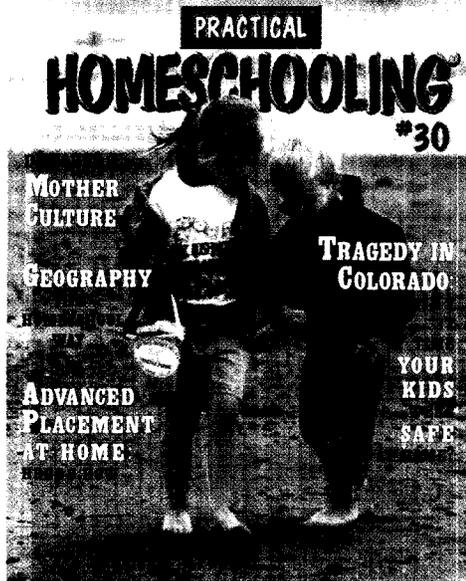
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