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## INTRODUCTION

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### **Old Blue, the West, and Me**

“This is nuts.”

Sitting on my motorcycle just after sunrise on a cool, misty August morning, my travel bag stuffed with extra jeans, socks, T-shirts, tools, and maps and strapped to the bike’s sissy bar, we—the bike and me—seemed set to take off on a trip across much of the northwestern United States and southern British Columbia. The turnaround point was to be Victoria, on Vancouver Island, where I was to meet my wife and daughter, my sister-in-law and her family, and various of their cousins, nieces, and nephews. I expected the trip to cover about 3,000 miles. I had been planning the trip for months, but now a voice from somewhere deep inside kept saying, “This is nuts. You are in your mid-fifties; you are going to get yourself killed out there; you have a wife and a teenage daughter; have you thought about them? Really?” As I sat there, Reasonable Jim seemed to be getting the upper hand over Irresponsible Jim, insisting that I roll the bike back into the garage, put the travel bag in the car, and head for the airport. But after a couple of minutes of to-be-or-not-to-be, I set good sense aside, fired up the bike’s engine, and rolled away.

The trip I began that August morning was the first of a series of motorcycling adventures around the western United States. The American West—its places and people, its past and present—is this book’s main character. I have lived my entire life in the West and, as a historian, I have read and written and lectured about the region’s history. But that was book learning. Experiencing the West from the saddle of a motorcycle helped me to see and experience how profoundly the past and the present rub up against each other.

When I was a kid, I dreamed of riding across the country on two wheels. In one version of the fantasy, the national press became entranced with my daring bicycle adventure and reported my daily progress. When I finally arrived in Washington, DC, the president met me at the White House gate and invited me to stay as his personal guest for as long as I wanted. My childhood fantasy treks always went eastward. After all, I was not stupid. I lived in Denver, and to the west lay the seemingly impenetrable Rockies. For some reason, it never occurred to me to head north or south.

One summer day, when I was about twelve or thirteen years old, I actually did it. I was pissed off at my parents in that incendiary way adolescent boys get pissed off at their parents. I would show them. I stole some cans of food from the kitchen cabinet, wrapped them in a blanket, somehow fastened the package to my bicycle, and took off. I headed toward Colfax Avenue, which led to US 36. That, I knew from family trips to Indiana, would take me all the way to Indianapolis. There I would get directions to Washington—and to the glory awaiting me.

About a half-mile into the journey, it occurred to me that I had forgotten to steal a can opener. “Oh well,” I thought, “I’ll just buy one on the road.” I realized, though, that I had only about a buck thirty-nine in my pocket. I guessed that I could probably buy a can opener for about thirty-nine cents, leaving me a dollar for the rest of the trip. No problem. I would get jobs along the way. I knew how to run a power mower. I hated mowing grass. That was why I was pissed off at my parents.

Another quarter-mile along, I accepted the futility of my plan. I made a U-turn and headed back home. The grand, heroic journey had lasted about seven minutes and covered less than a mile. As I pedaled home, I glanced at the Rockies rising above the horizon.

The dream faded away after that. The agonies and pleasures of high school and college in the Vietnam War era left little room for such fantasies.

I finished college and, my hard-won political science degree in hand, cooked pizzas and hamburgers for a time. I met a terrific young woman. She was pretty and much smarter than me, but she married me anyway and then went to law school. I worked part-time and went to graduate school to study history. We moved in with her mother—a lovely lady and a fabulous cook—and I got comfortable and fat.

Eventually, after my wife finished law school, we bought a home—a century-old house in the Denver neighborhood where I grew up. The house needed a lot of repairs and upgrades, and I became skilled at making sawdust. I finished my doctoral studies and began teaching at various colleges and universities between Denver and Fort Collins. I was an academic “freeway flyer,” one of the growing corps of underemployed, vagabond PhDs working for miserable pay and no benefits. Freeway flyers are popular with higher education administrators because they are cheap and disposable.

As I sharpened my teaching and driving skills, I was drawn back to the bicycle. I had to do something to fight the weight and high blood pressure caused by my mother-in-law’s great cooking and a decade of sitting around libraries and archives. Once we (i.e., my wife) began earning some real money, I discovered expensive, custom-built bicycles. I loved teaching and was good at it, but riding became my passion. Even though I never again had a visible waistline, I grew stronger and felt great as my thighs bulged and my blood pressure dropped. At age fifty I could pedal more than 100 miles in a day without great fatigue. For several years I rode in “centuries,” 100-mile tours organized by charities or sometimes as business ventures. The Santa Fe Century was my favorite. The route followed the old Turquoise Road out of Santa Fe into the Sandia Mountains, passed through decomposing mining towns in the general direction of Albuquerque, descended from Golden into the Estancia Valley, turned east and north through Stanley and Galisteo—where many western movies have been filmed—and back to Santa Fe. The tour took place in mid-May each year and was a physical and sensory delight, with mountains of red sandstone, piñon pine, sagebrush desert, endless blue skies, and Santa Fe’s world-class dining all in one day. For a historian, simply being in Santa Fe was a satisfying experience.

The bicycling and making sawdust kept me more or less sane. I became a very good teacher, popular with my students and even respected among my colleagues. I wrote a couple of books and several articles and won some

awards for them. I finally landed a tenure-track job at the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) and seemed to be on a roll professionally. I liked UCD's students because they were, for the most part, paying their own way; they worked hard, were not involved in fraternities or sororities, and did not care about University of Colorado (CU) football. I took over the history department's graduate program and integrated the School of Education's social studies teacher licensing and graduate programs into it, making it one of the largest and most productive programs at the university.

Universities employ three basic types of personnel: the staff, who keep things running; the faculty, who do the work of scholarship and teaching; and the administrators, who invent ways to keep the staff and faculty from doing their jobs. At UCD, two of the latter species were the Vice-Chancellor for Featherbedding and the Vice-Chancellor for International Boondoggles. Because no good deed ever goes unpunished in the academic world, I found myself locked in bureaucratic battles with those two grand panjandrums. The struggles lasted only slightly longer than the Napoleonic Wars. I cannot honestly claim that I won the War of the Vice-Chancellors; rather, like the Russian general Mikhail Kutusov at Borodino, I simply declared victory and abandoned the battle. Eventually, both vice-chancellors left the university and, like Russia after Napoleon's retreat, I was still there. The problem was that I really no longer wanted to be there. I ached for something honest and unspoiled by pettiness, something new and exciting—something vice-chancellors and other noxious creatures could not spoil.

In early 2005, as the War of the Vice-Chancellors drew to its dismal end, I saw an ad for a Harley-Davidson V-Rod motorcycle. I had seen *Easy Rider* in college and still remembered most of the lyrics of "Born to Be Wild."<sup>1</sup> Beyond that, I had never given much thought to motorcycles. On that dreary January day, though, the Harley ad touched me in a place where, until then, only custom bicycles and expensive table saws had reached. I tried to ignore the call. Then I tried to push it away. I even bought an expensive table saw. Nothing helped.

Making matters worse, in March 2005 my friend and bicycling partner, Phineas, announced that he would not be available to ride the coming weekend. He was taking a motorcycle licensing course. A Texan by birth (and a survivor of that state's high school football insanity), a Tennessean by choice of graduate schools, and a Coloradan by employment, Phineas also

happened to work at UCD. We had met about ten years earlier, not on campus but bicycling in Denver's Washington Park. Smart, funny, and diligently searching for his third or fourth ex-wife, Phineas was a congenial companion, both complementing and contrasting my talents and eccentricities.

By the end of March, Phineas was beginning each bicycle ride with tales about his morning motorcycle tours around town on his Harley. Especially satisfying for Phineas were the flirty looks and waves from pretty young women. Finally, in August, two months before my fifty-fifth birthday, I succumbed. I took the motorcycling course, got my license, and visited a Harley dealer. As soon as I sat on a V-Rod, I knew it was not right. To ride it, I would have to sit in a racing posture—too low for my stiff back and rounded mid-section. Then I tried a Heritage Softail. It was big and deep red, with full, sculpted fenders. The bike fit me, and I fit it. I had ridden only the small Honda Nighthawk provided by the motorcycling school, and that only in the big high school parking lot where the course was taught. I confessed my inexperience to the salesman who cheerfully, and without condescension, arranged to deliver the bike. Later that afternoon the gleaming Harley, already—for no special reason—christened “Old Blue,” was parked in my garage.

“What the hell have I done? That thing weighs 700 pounds and has more horsepower than some cars!” I stared at the bike for two days. I was scared of it and even more afraid that I might hurt it. Finally, I pulled on my shiny new boots, gloves, helmet, and leather jacket, pushed the bike out of the garage, and fired it up. Even with its stock, EPA-approved pipes, its engine had a deep, satisfying rumble. I rolled slowly out of the alley onto the street and rode around my immediate neighborhood, reaching speeds as high as 18 miles per hour, getting the feel of the bike's clutch, shifter, brakes, and steering. My turns varied from too tight to too wide. I was not too concerned, though, because in the final road test at motorcycle school the instructor told me I had “killed” myself only twice (four “fatal” errors were the standard for flunking the test). That first ride went on for 4 miles. When I parked the bike, I noticed that my fingers ached and were sort of frozen in a grip. I was sweating profusely and trembling just a bit. But my mouth spread into a huge grin and, punching the air with my claw-like half-fist, I shouted “yes!”

For the next few days, I confined my outings on Old Blue to my immediate neighborhood. Finally, Phineas coaxed me out for lengthier excursions on

busier thoroughfares in the city. The first time I accelerated to 40 miles per hour I thought I had passed the bounds of reason, that 40 was insane. Then I remembered once touching 51 miles per hour on my bicycle on a long, steep downhill segment of a century. By comparison, 40 on a big Harley seemed somewhat less irrational. As I explored more of the circuits Phineas had pioneered, my speeds and confidence grew.

The fall and winter months of 2005–6 were unusually mild, and I was able to spend many afternoons and weekends on Old Blue, sharpening my riding skills and becoming more comfortable with longer and faster rides. On a Saturday in mid-November, after three months of riding in and around Denver, I headed out alone, westbound on US 285 into the mountains, breaching the forbidding barrier of my bicycling youth—and of my bicycling adulthood. I had traveled US 285 between Denver and Fairplay many times by car, but on this trip something happened to me that had never happened on any previous trip. At the top of Kenosha Pass (10,001 feet above sea level), the road goes into a sharp right curve. At the curve's apex, mountain hillside and forest suddenly give way to the seemingly endless vista of South Park. I gasped as I rounded that curve and looked into the long, almost flat mountain valley. Descending the pass and riding into the valley, I realized that I had just had an experience I could not have had any other way. On foot or on a bicycle, the scene would have unfolded gradually and thus lacked the element of surprise I had just experienced. It had never happened, and could never happen, in a car because, seen through car windows, the world might as well be on television. But on Old Blue, that sudden view of South Park was an aesthetic smack in the face. As I rounded that curve, not only the view but also the temperature and even the smell changed. Before I reached the bottom of the pass I wanted that kind of experience again. By the time I reached the town of Fairplay, where I gassed up and turned back toward Denver, I resolved that I would spend as much time as I could traveling by motorcycle, searching for more such smacks in the face.

What follows are accounts of my motorcycling adventures in the American West. I have tried to describe the things I have seen, some of the people I have met, and what those scenes and people prompted me to think about. The first trip began as just a road trip with no purpose in mind other than adventure. As that journey progressed, however, the American West's rich history insisted on riding along. For decades, historians have studied and

debated the history of the American West in terms of whether it is a place, a process, or a cultural ideal. Many years ago I penned something called the “Immutable Second Law of History, revised edition,” a list of about a dozen silly, yet deeply profound, principles for thinking about history. One of them proclaims, “For any historical question having two or more plausible explanations, the correct interpretation is ‘yes.’” By that standard the American West is, yes, a place, many processes, and a bundle of cultural ideals. The West I discovered on these trips is a distinct place, defined by geography and weather; in that place, important processes of human, economic, political, cultural, and environmental development and conflict occurred and continue to occur that both define the region as a place and link its history intimately with the larger history of the United States and the world. Along the way, Americans created deeply and tenaciously held ideas, stereotypes, and values about the West, the people who populated it, and the region’s role in building the American nation. The place, the processes, the diverse people, and the ideas of the West were all there for me to see and to think about on Old Blue’s Road.

## NOTE

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1. *Easy Rider*, directed by Dennis Hopper, Raybert Productions, Pando Company, Columbia TriStar Picture Group, Culver City, CA, 1969; Mars Bonfire, “Born to Be Wild,” on Steppenwolf, *Steppenwolf* (ABC Dunhill Records, 1968).