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## THEME FROM AN IMAGINARY WESTERN

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The first movie western, *The Great Train Robbery*, was filmed in New Jersey, or upstate New York, depending on whom you believe. The Homer of western writers, Owen Wister, was a Philadelphia lawyer. Zane Grey, the king of the formula western, was a dentist from Ohio. Louis L'Amour, inheritor of the Grey legacy, wrote about the wild wild west from the City of Angels and had such powerful concentration that he boasted he could compose

on a median in the middle of the Santa Monica Freeway.

Mary Austin, who wrote so beguilingly of the great dry lands experience, spent much of her creative life in New York City, as did other "western" writers, Willa Cather and May Swenson. Jackson Pollock, the celebrated urban-ite drip, fling, splash, and swirl painter, was born in Cody, Wyoming.

These facts might seem discordant if not downright contradictory. They may be, but the ability to keep two opposites

in mind helps us to negotiate this arid vale of tears. It's not enough to circle it as yin and yang or simply pin it on a star sign. It is instead what keeps us wrangling — to acknowledge both sides of Prudence. It may also have something to do with the way past and present coexist in our minds. It may be the way sound shifts in passing. Where we are is also where we have been. We have to escape in order to return.

It is for these reasons, perhaps, that Edward Abbey wrote parts of his classic, *Desert Solitaire*, in Hoboken, New Jersey, and that he penned the Introduction while seated at Nelson's Marine Bar, just a few staggers from the town's greasy waterfront. Abbey defends individualism and anarchy just across the river from the Colossus, corporate and cultural Yosemite. *Desert Solitaire* treats of the wide-open and ever-twisting canyon country, the big American empty, and it was partially written in a mile-square, sea-level town with a notoriously corrupt government, a town which on rainy days smelled like coffee, owing to the Maxwell House plant that is no more. Good to the last drop it may have been, but a place farther from Arches is hard to imagine.

I must now confess that when I was living in Hoboken, on native-son Mr. Francis Albert Sinatra's very street, Monroe Street — neither a peaceful, nor a sylvan, nor indeed a particularly wholesome street — that I began to write a western. I did it my way. It proved to be a western that got away from me, but a western it was meant to be.

I felt homesick, true. I was way out of my element. Just how I ended up in Hoboken, New Jersey, is of little importance. Because I did not know exactly who I was and was homesick, I tried my hand at that imported homegrown species of genre fiction.

Because I had grown up in Salt Lake City, Utah and felt embarrassed about it, I felt I needed some *Wanderjahren* to make up for it. Few places, surely, would be less provincial than the Big Apple. Obviously in that belief I was naïve. It's impossible to imagine a more insular, self-absorbed, and indeed more provincial place than Manhattan Island, love it though I did. Thirteen miles in length . . .

In Wyoming it is possible to walk for thirteen miles and not see another human being, not to mention no sidewalk vendors, wind-

shield cleaners, police officers on Morgans, aspiring artists, mortgage bankers, models, bicycle messengers, heiresses, feral goats, securities analysts, au pairs, thin young men dressed in homage to Carmen Miranda, flimflam artistes, Hasidim, boat people, and waiters and waitresses with 8x10 smiles. But again, no matter. Hoboken was cheaper than Manhattan and to be writing a western in Hoboken, New Jersey at the time made perfect sense.

The story grows slightly prophetic. I set my western in a not-entirely imaginary town in southwestern Wyoming. The name of the town was Gilmer, based on the earliest name of a real-life, short-lived town eventually called Bear River City. I still wish to write the story of Bear River City, or Beartown, but let me briefly say that Bear River City was a hell-on-wheels railroad town that sprang up in 1868 and had a swift and violent history, including, to properly set the scene, a hanging from a telegraph pole of three bad boys who were given to garroting—or strangling for money and thrills—some of the more solid citizens and newcomers, whomever they could. The neck-tie party of the three bad boys was courtesy of a Committee of Vigilance, and the hanging led to a riot at one Stephen Knuckles' store, which resulted in bloodshed and destruction, but, as I said earlier, the western got away from me. Before I could even get the Committee of Vigilance formed, I took a detour to Sinamon Ranch.

Blame it on the pull of mountain scenery. In those days I was so smitten by the Uinta Range piedmont that I could not help but set a prologue there. The prologue turned into a story, and the story ran away. The story began at Sinamon Ranch, named for the late Rupert Sinamon, whose fiery daughter, Viola, ran the place. Two of Rupert's hey-day pals, Beaver Dick Sedgwick and Marten Martinson still lingered, like a skunk's scent left in passing. Viola became enamored of a wiry ranch hand named Doug Furr, who had come to Sinamon Ranch looking for work rather than love, but who had, in the process, supplanted Viola's erstwhile suitor, Grady. Grady would find his own love interest in a lovely (naturally) schoolmarm with blue-green eyes named Dolly. Finally, the real catalyst of the action was the hijinks of two miscreant miners plying their sluicy trade illegally in the cliff-girt haunted vastness of Dead Horse Gulch, Albert "Red" Herring and Will Ritter.

As you may have gathered, I had no business writing a western about southwestern Wyoming while living in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Did I mention that I now make my home in southwestern Wyoming? Did I mention that my wife has blue-green eyes and is a variety of schoolmarm? Hmmm. It only took 15 years for life to imitate bad fiction.

At least two other things got in the way of my writing. The first was that I had no idea how to correctly render a western. I couldn't get the point of view right and often employed a snotty narrator to comment on, rather than propel, the action. I also went a little too far to make what I thought were jokes. The second and more serious problem with my ersatz western, first called *On Evil Creek* later *Across these Endless Skies* was my weakness and inclination toward parody. My western quickly became a parody of a western. Now, that worked pretty well, but it then devolved into a parody of a parody of a western, where it hit its stride but lost its way. At times, indeed, it became a parody cubed.

My formula western now gathers dust and hanta virus in a neighboring state, but that is another story.

My Garden State time I see now as a penance for growing up in Salt Lake City, a type of composting, one might say, for times to come. I had to get away from the West to discover my western-ness. What precisely was wrong with growing up in Salt Lake City?

It's complicated, as relations with hometowns tend to be. Surely, though, growing up alienated in Zion is the source of part of my contrariness. Growing up in splendid natural surroundings led not to wholeness but to a bifurcation that won't go away. Life among the righteous resulted in the most startling heathenism.

Wallace Stegner grew up in Salt Lake and puts the pull of landscape perfectly in an essay from *The Sound of Mountain Water* called "At Home in the Fields of the Lord,"

Salt Lake lies in the lap of mountains. East of it, within easy reach of any boy, seven canyons lead directly up into another climate, to fishing and hunting and camping and climbing and winter skiing . . .<sup>1</sup>

Knowing Salt Lake City means knowing its canyons, too, for no city of my acquaintance except possibly Reno,

breaks off so naturally and easily into fine free country. The line between city and mountains is as clean as the line between a port city and salt water. Up in the Wasatch is another world, distinct and yet contributory, and a Salt Lake boyhood is inevitably colored by it.<sup>2</sup>

Amen, Brother Wally! Any childhood would be colored by it too, but mine was steeped in darkest *green* by the experience. I grew up near enough to Big Cottonwood Canyon that I could ride my bicycle to it and did. Once I could drive, I spent nearly all my free time there, or around the corner in Little Cottonwood Canyon. In the 1970s as well, Salt Lake was still undiscovered by the active outdoorsy masses of people just like me, so that it seemed, to large extent, that the canyons were mine. Mine to hike, ski, climb, nature worship, party in. From Holladay the Wasatch ramparts were near enough to touch, near enough to reach in five or ten minutes.

Terry Tempest William's well-known book about the Salt Lake area, *Refuge*, focuses on the Great Salt Lake and its surroundings. For me, though, the Great Salt Lake seemed like a fetid stagnant cesspool ringed with dead brine flies. I think I went there twice. And as for birds — who on earth cared to spend hours looking at birds in those days? It was the mountains that tugged me, mountains and motion, mountains that provided an escape, but not necessarily an escape *from* but an escape *to* — to what was real.

The problem was, and to some extent still is, the reentry. A callow yet sunburned Romantic youth, I fell for all of Nature's tricks. I fell in love with her, with her scrub oak and stream crossings, sunsets and snow slopes. I began to think Nature held all the truth, all the beauty. Meantime, Salt Lake City was home to the most industrious, sober, business-adept, hard-work-is-virtuous, and heaven-headed society imaginable. Idling away the hours, dawdling on the heights, scrambling up steep slopes or noodling in light powder snow were pursuits that were looked down upon by many Salt Lakers as trifles, and worse, as things of "this world." Nature as backdrop was good enough for them: scenery held at arm's length. Many Mormon hymns celebrate the hills, the fastness of the Great Basin Zion citadel, but it was an appreciation admixed with the idea that the wilderness must be subdued and populated. I had to be out in

the mountains — groping for holds and shredding the always-new — as often as possible or I couldn't deal with my stultifying life.

The mountains and canyons — the inviting, homey granite domes of Brighton, the reddish glacially-polished soaring quartzite slabs of Broad's Fork, the endless steep hike to Lake Blanche, the wildflowers of July and August scattered through all the drainages: blue penstemon, scarlet gilia, cone flowers, mule's ears, larkspur, Indian paintbrush, wild onions, whatever — the bluebird mornings of February, the flagrant display of gold-burnished aspen arrayed Mills B through F, this used to be my playground, Brothers and Sisters, Amen.



In elementary school I looked up at the Wasatch Range — the mountain ramparts, the mountain walls, and believed that they marked the end of the world. There was nothing beyond those mountains. Many Utahans still believe this to be true. Although Salt Lake is not as isolated as it used to be, in the 60s and 70s, it was still a backwater provincial town, a cemetery with lights. Just as I had wanted to get out of suburbia and into the hills as often as I could, so too I began to want to get the hell out of Salt Lake before it was too late, before the town did all its work on me.

The trouble with having a mountainous paradise within easy, immediate reach was that it could lead to complacency. It became possible to want nothing more than some way of making a living that enabled three or four ski days a week, and with a reliable supplier of ganja, the occasional embrace of a warm body, and Peruvian hat or two, life couldn't get any better, and certainly not much easier. In the summer there was rock climbing with the crew, in the spring or fall wild bacchanalian desert trips to do the trick. This was — and probably still is — an ideal life for a student, and as I majored in skiing at the Norwegian University of Utah, it suited me fine. Still, I knew there was something else out there, and if it meant I would have to wander widely and get my nose rubbed in that something out there, so be it.



Growing up in Salt Lake City, though, obviously meant more than simply frolicking in the awe-inspiring surroundings. It also meant coming to terms with Mormonism. I am a baptized Mormon, though not a practicing or believing one. All my family is Mormon, and I treasure them, but despite the efforts of many good men and women, I just couldn't be made to fit the mold. I'd like to stress the respect with which I hold some of the individuals who tried to save me. They took an honest interest in me, and it wasn't mere sanctimonious preaching or moralizing.

Randy Jensen, to name one, was a Holladay boy who had gone to Vietnam, came back messed up, fell into bad living, and then, on a solo bicycling trip across the U.S. — in Wyoming of all places — had a kind of vision that involved an elk, a wapiti, and it turned his life around. He went straight, served a mission to Japan, and saw his calling as helping wayward sons like me. Randy proved the ideal mentor. He wrote me letters, talked to me on the phone, took walks with me. He went way beyond the call of duty, in fact, and though his efforts were futile, he never engaged in any emotional voodoo.

My argument with Mormonism was not primarily theological. Although the Faith had tenets I could not agree with, and there were many questions that my teachers could not answer, I now realize that nothing at the time would have worked. You could have preached Rastafarianism or Free Love or Druidism to me and I would have questioned it. Nor indeed did I have insurmountable ethical problems with Mormonism. Mormons are generally decent people, no worse, on the whole, than those who follow other creeds. There's not much inherently wrong with espousing family values, depending on how you define them. Hard work, sacrifice, helping the less fortunate, service to others, a sense of community — these are positive values.

Part of my problem with the church was aesthetic: the LDS liturgy was a bland and colorless affair. The ward houses tended to be homely, roof-rich, unadorned, standardized, and everywhere. The Sacrament Meeting sermons leaned toward the tedious, obvious and windy, and because they were given by lay members without any special training, they violated most of the rules and regulations of sensible interpretation. I did not like the anti-intellectual trend of the

conservative wing of the church. Liberal wing was not entirely an oxymoron. There were at least three dozen Mormons who were also Democrats. True, in those days liberal Mormon may have been logically equivalent to jumbo shrimp or great hair band, but at times in the church's history, the Brethren and members were somewhat friendlier to intellectual discourse. True, I had problems with the idea that the Almighty had appeared to an unlettered Yankee farm boy named Joseph Smith, and it was at the time not entirely clear whether the Saints worshiped Jesus or Joseph. I couldn't understand why our African-American brothers were barred from holding the priesthood when other people of pigment were not. I didn't like the second-class way the "Lamanites" (Native Americans) among us were treated, and the whole "Twelve Tribes" business seemed like a stretch. It was also hard to get past the logical thicket of the claim that we Mormons had the "only true church" when elements had been so clearly borrowed from many other faiths. But all of these issues and complaints could have been dealt with but one. My well-intentioned leaders, teachers, parents wanted me to be something I could not be, which is to say, they wanted me — and all of us — to conform and to fit a mold.

Take a mission for instance. Young Mormon boys were expected to go on a mission, to serve the Lord for two years, proselytizing door to door. For many Mormon boys, and some Mormon girls, the mission is an important milestone: it teaches discipline, perseverance, hard work, study skills — other solid virtues. Boys become men on missions, girls women. Still, the thought of sharing a room with a stranger for two years, getting up early to study the scriptures, walking around in a squeaky clean suit and tie, with the name tag and perilously short hair, and selling something to the public — these were things I didn't want to do.

Following a mission, a Mormon male found an eternal mate while finishing school, started a family as soon as practical, and found a job in the professions or business. A Mormon female also, hopefully, would find an eternal mate and quickly take up homemaking and child rearing.

Two of my favorite Mormon writers, Levi Peterson and Robert van Wagoner, served missions and were deeply scarred by the expe-

rience. Levi still speaks with open contempt of his mission president and avers that he may have acted upon dark urges regarding the man's grave. Rob is still intensely angry about his mission — angry perhaps most of all at himself, because he could not believe what he was selling, but he couldn't manage to quite leave it all either, for quitting or being sent home, as in military life, were worse than not going at all. People talked. People make assumptions. In talking to these two mission survivors, I thank my lucky stars I didn't serve a mission, and that although terribly disappointed in me, my parents didn't make me go.

Well, that's not entirely accurate. I did serve a mission. I served a mission to the Cottonwood Canyons. I labored in the Temple of the Untracked Powder. I "traced" tree-to-tree and worshipped in the Church of the Open Sky. I grew to love the denizens of that snow-kissed land. Although I won no new converts to the faith, I don't suffer the residual bitterness of those years of service, rather the opposite.



In East-Coast exile I quite naturally tried to deny my Mormon roots. Partly this was because I grew tired of the two standard oh-so-you're-from-Utah questions: No, I was not a Mormon; not everyone in Utah is. Yes, polygamy is actually under control in my immediate family. If my interlocutor was not satisfied, I'd generally add, that yes, yes of course, I have had a torrid affair with Marie Osmond. Torrid, got it?

But denying my Mormon-ness, at least from an ethnic or cultural point of view, was simply an act of bad faith, a denial of who I was.

There is some debate as to whether Mormons, Utah Mormons, comprise an ethnicity. Few modern scholars would make that sort of claim, especially since we are only talking about five or six generations, and in contemporary sociological theory there is no such thing as unalloyed ethnicity. Insofar as identity goes, however, Mormonism can easily be classified as a subculture. There may have been interbreeding, there is cultural codification, often undecipherable to outsiders, but mostly there is shared identity and a widespread

sub-cultural shorthand of understanding, a set of shared rituals, practices, and beliefs stretching from the cradle to the grave.

Going back those five or six generations, *all*, yes *all* of my ancestors crossed the plains as Mormon pioneers. Some were from Denmark or Germany, most were from the English Midlands, but all of them became Americans, western Americans, who settled somewhere in Utah between Provo and Logan.

What once caused embarrassment, now I see as a source of pride, but that is getting ahead of the story.