

LIFE ABOVE
7000 FEET in
Wyoming

Shifting Tectonic Memory Plates

Richard F. Fleck

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Dedication

To my loving wife Maura and our three children, Rich, Michelle, and Maureen who very much shared Wyoming with me, and to my seven grandchildren, Patrick, Catherine, Clare, Ross, Holly, Greta and Sean, at least one of whom may become a writer.

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Prelude

High Plains Reality

Once when I was doing research in Oxford at the Horace Plunkett Foundation and staying with a University of Wyoming couple, both on sabbatical leave at Oxford University, I was struck with the statement of young Professor John Warnock, my host, that within a few weeks their sabbatical would end and that they ultimately must face “High Plains Reality.” Of course, what immediately came to mind was the harsh physical reality of a vast and open country on the edge of a planetary rim so different from the genteel environment of Oxford, England with its gently flowing River Thames laced with white swans. And, of course, the harsh, almost Martian

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climate of Wyoming entered my mind as well.

But what may constitute “High Plains Reality” is far more than a physical sense of place where a person can look down the streets of Laramie to see a blue dome of sky and where one, at first, feels a shortness of breath with Wyoming’s scarcity of oxygen some 7,000 feet higher than Oxford. “High Plains Reality” must at least take into account the dire need for a psychic integration with the openness of land. What is it that open land does for the mind and spirit? At first, surely, it alienates one, seemingly, from the rest of the world including Oxford, England. But after days, weeks, months, and possibly years it may engender a sense of integration that is both intellectual and spiritual. Where contrasting realities within our being exist, they must be allowed to bear with one another somewhat like shifting tectonic plates far beneath the surface of Wyoming. There are people out

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there we can turn to including second and third generation ranchers, but most especially Native Americans who have already accomplished this process of integration for dozens if not hundreds of generations. I realize this sense of integration with the land is quite difficult to realize while driving through the Shirley Basin during a fierce ground blizzard under a bright blue sky and shining sun whose rays fail to penetrate howling snow from the car hood down to road level. It is difficult to achieve psychic integration when shoveling concrete-heavy, frozen snow in igloo blocks from an obscured driveway. It is difficult to arrive at a sense of integration while skating on a frozen town pond when it is so cold your fingers begin to freeze under thick and warm mittens. Even summers on the High Plains can try the nerves with dust devils whirling mysteriously across the open prairie or where sometimes mosquitoes are so thick

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that they clog the nostrils and make breathing difficult. “High Plains Reality” hits the English professor hard when he has just returned from Oxford to face students from the hinterlands, and yet *these* students can have insights no others have.

Nonetheless, after weeks and months, a sense of psychic integration with the land begins to set in after one stops to admire the magnificence of purple pasque flowers pushing their way through thin panes of ice that cover a springtime prairie with its strong scent of sagebrush. Yes, Native Americans can help the non-Indian appreciate the spirituality of the land and its people. Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday admonishes the reader of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* to look hard:

East of my grandmother's house the sun rises out of the plain. Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to

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give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

Oxford is surely a nice respite for a Wyomingite as long as he realizes that he must face “High Plains Reality” and become one with the land just as N. Scott Momaday strongly suggests.

CHAPTER ONE

Coming to Laramie

Prairie Road

Out Wyoming way there's many a prairie road going up and down over knolls and mounds green and brown so far into the distance, the two ruts become one at the planet's very rim. So when I become weary in spirit, to a prairie road I must go and wander out towards a sage-scented infinity under those cobalt-blue skies laced with a puffy cloud or two touching the horizon as if to lure me onward.

-R. Fleck, from *Cottonwood Moon*.

Why on earth would a kid from Wernersville, Pennsylvania and later Princeton, New Jersey choose Laramie, Wyoming as his new home? It's a bit of a long

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story but not too complicated. Obviously, neither Wernersville nor Princeton had little or nothing to do with it, nor did my alma mater Rutgers University. But what *did* have a lot to do with it was my taking a seasonal job in 1959 as a Park Ranger Naturalist in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado, after graduating from Rutgers. The contrast between high alpine country and New Brunswick, New Jersey was overwhelming. I feel in love with clear blue skies and year-round snowfields and bright green tundra as opposed to gray, rainy skies and old brick factory buildings adjacent to Rutgers campus.

After basic training, I got stationed at the adjacent Shadow Mountain National Recreation Area on the west side outside of the park near Granby, Colorado which, in a few ways, strangely resembled Wernersville. Of course the mountains were much bigger than the Blue Ridge Mountains of eastern Pennsylvania, and of course Grand

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Lake, Shadow Mountain and Granby Reservoirs were much bigger than any lakes I had seen as a boy in Pennsylvania, but somehow those rolling sagebrush hills west of Shadow Mountain resembled in a soulful way the rolling countryside of Wernersville where we took daily walks along a sheep trail.

How did I come to get a ranger job as a French literature major with a biology minor at Rutgers? It just so happened that during the previous two summers I worked as a research assistant at the New Jersey Oyster Research Laboratory in Bivalve, New Jersey along the marshy shoreline of the Delaware Bay. I intended to become a marine biologist but was cast into a pre-med program among a bunch of guys who wanted to go to Columbia or Cornell Medical College. I was more interested in sea creatures of the world's oceans than in humans. Hence, I made my switch from biology to

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literature, French literature at that. So I had the minimum number of credit hours in biological sciences to be considered as a seasonal ranger naturalist. But, because Rocky Mountain National Park got and still gets a number of French tourists, and because I spoke French, that is another reason why I was selected.

How does this all relate to Laramie? Laramie is about seventy-five miles north of Rocky Mountain National Park whose rugged alpine terrain served as my “dream world.” Whether to go permanent in the Park Service or go on for a master’s degree in literature at nearby Colorado State University was the question. But I quickly elected the latter. From time to time, during my scant spare time, I thought it would be nice to add a new state to my travels during graduate school. One bright day in late May I drove up to Laramie to see the flower-filled University of Wyoming campus in an otherwise

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bleak prairie town. But that immense open space surrounding the town simply was alluring.

A few years later, after receiving my M.A. degree and serving in the U.S Navy, I met my future Irish bride Maura in Princeton where she worked as a serials clerk at Princeton University Library and knew my father who was then Acquisitions Librarian. We dated for a year and a half, fell in love, and got married in Princeton to move up to Williamstown, Massachusetts in the heart of the beautiful Berkshire Mountains to take my first teaching position at North Adams State College. But I really didn't like the "mechanicality" of teaching beginning French and English composition at this Massachusetts State College and searched for a new opportunity. Where? --at the University of Wyoming so close to my dream world of Rocky Mountain National Park. And that's why we chose Laramie, Wyoming as our new

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home. As the old cowboy song goes, “Whoppie tie yai oh, git along little doggies, for Wyoming is gonna be your new home!”

Driving forever westward from Williamstown, we finally arrived in Nebraska where Interstate 80 gave way to old U.S. 30 that kept climbing at an noticeable angle from Grand Island to Ogallala, and then it really became steeper up in the Nebraska Panhandle through Sidney and Kimball and into Pine Bluffs, Wyoming at an elevation of a mile above sea level. I stopped the car so we could get out and just smell the sagebrush and hear melodious western meadow larks in great open spaces where land is mostly sky. The rolling, expansive prairie acted like a magnet on our souls. Within an hour we entered the capitol city of Cheyenne above 6,000 feet. Would we ever stop climbing upward? U.S. 30 took us up a high rising ridge or “gang plank” (used by bison to get to high

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summer grazing) as John McPhee describes in *Rising from the Plains*. We spotted scores of wild antelope—Wyoming actually has more antelope than humans—as we reached an altitude of 8,000 feet. Still higher went the road up to the highest point on the old Lincoln Highway above 8,800 feet. It seemed like we were now in some sort of aircraft with an un-pressurized cabin. Then the road sharply dropped down through pine-forested Telephone Canyon down to the Gem City of the High Plains, Laramie, Wyoming, resting at an elevation of slightly over 7,200 feet—our new home. This little western town with the Laramie River flowing through it, houses the University of Wyoming with its 800-acre campus with its buildings built of rough-cut sandstone. The university was founded in 1886, four years before Wyoming became a State. The campus has hundreds of colorful flowerbeds as well as “Prexy’s Pasture,” a

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central open yard, once covered with prairie sagebrush, the size of a football field. Otto Dahl, who happened to be Adolph Hitler's gardener, came to Wyoming after the war and was hired to develop and cultivate these great flower gardens. When we arrived, only 7,000 students (one for each foot of altitude) attended the university including many foreign students coming from the Middle East to study petroleum engineering or wool technology, and of course English as a second language. My department was housed in the sandstone edifice called the Arts and Science Building in front of Prexy's Pasture and my office mate would be none other than Lynn Cheney. Maura and I looked forward to settling in so she could get the house or apartment in order and I could begin preparing for my teaching responsibilities a few months ahead.

Unfortunately, temporary university housing was

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not available to us for some four weeks! What to do was the question. After signing my teaching contract and being welcomed by my new department, we proceeded south to Denver and the old Gart Brothers sporting goods store where we bought a new blue and orange tent, camping supplies and dehydrated food and returned to my beloved Rocky Mountain National Park and camp at various areas including Moraine Park and Timber Creek Campground. Though Maura objected to camping for three or four weeks (she grew up in Ireland on a County Monaghan farm with no running water or electricity), she nonetheless agreed to camp considering the circumstances. She was and is a true sport who just happened to have open-hearth-cooking skills. Our twenty-eight days of living in a tent (except for once a week visiting friends or staying in a motel) proved to be more than memorable. We loved to hear coyotes yip-

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yapping at night and we loved to see the morning sun rays illuminating the summit of Longs Peak. The fresh smell of ponderosa pine resin was thoroughly refreshing, and thankfully the weather remained perfect—sunny warm days and pleasantly cool evenings at 8,000 feet. Was I a ranger once again? We took the same hikes I had led six years earlier up Specimen Mountain to watch bighorn sheep eating the salty volcanic soil deep within the crater. We hoofed along the Lulu City Trail that followed the Colorado River up to the remains of an old silver mining town and a mining shaft in the side of Trail Ridge Mountain. Nothing was better than sitting near a crackling campfire at night with an after-dinner glass of wine along with some European cheeses and grapes.

At long last the University of Wyoming provided us, for a very modest rent, temporary housing where I could comfortably prepare for the five classes I was

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scheduled to teach in the upcoming weeks. The semester began right after Labor Day—but what a freakish opening day it was! I trudged through a half foot of snow during an early September blizzard. All the beautiful campus flowers lay buried under frosty snow. What else could one expect above 7,000 feet? Maybe we should have remained back in the Berkshires! All through my morning classes I worried about our car not having anti-freeze. When students asked me questions (world literature and English composition), I had them repeat them so that my dazed mind could register them more effectively. I guess I wasn't much of a conversationalist with Lynn Cheney (I certainly wouldn't be now, or would I?).

Days passed quickly during a nice Indian Summer that followed the freak September snowstorm. We found a nice home to buy at the very northern end of town in

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view of high red knolls and rolling open prairie. We once again loved to listen to the howling of coyotes on those sage-scented red hills under a full moon. The nighttime sky loomed over our front porch with a full view of the Milky Way as though it arose from the smoking chimney of one of our neighbors' houses down the street. We grew to love our prairie town of Laramie named after an early French Canadian fur trapper by the name of Jacques Laramie. During the 1870's the citizens of Laramie were given a choice by the territorial government before Wyoming became a State. Do you want to house a prison in your town or a university? Rawlins chose the prison and Laramie wisely chose the university. Ten years earlier Laramie served as an important supply link in the building of the nation's transcontinental railway in 1869 from New York and Chicago to Oakland, California. It had made it as far as Laramie in 1868, and to Promontory

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Point, Utah the following year where Irish workers from the east met Chinese workers coming from the golden west

One of our weekend activities that we thoroughly enjoyed was going to university football games on Saturday afternoons at War Memorial Stadium, but I must admit that the beautiful Laramie Range, with its dark-shadowed canyons just to the east always tended to distract me from the games. Back in 1965 and 1966 Jim Kiick played as fullback, and it was his team that eventually went to the Sugar Bowl in 1967 (losing to LSU by one touchdown). He was later drafted by the Miami Dolphins. It was fun to watch the crowds and hear the bands playing loudly with the beating of drums sounding like some sort of Indian Powwow. Football certainly was a change in pace from any academic matters pleasant or unpleasant.

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It was exciting for me to teach world literature and English composition at this university. In addition to Homer's Iliad and Virgil's Aeneid, we examined such European texts as the essays of Michel de Montaigne, the plays of Moliere. But since the university was totally and magnificently surrounded by rolling prairies and mountains, I wished that I could teach regional literature of the American West where I would have the perfect backdrop. However, I needed to take a leave of absence to pursue a doctorate from the University of New Mexico before I could teach "upper division" classes. Within two years, I did just that by our living off my wife's salary at the University of New Mexico Library in order that I could tackle course work without having to become a teaching assistant. Before leaving Albuquerque, I had selected my dissertation topic to complete while teaching full-time back up in Laramie. Eventually I was given a

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section or two of “Regional Literature of the American West” that put my teaching in synch with the lone prairies and howling coyotes under the vast Milky Way.

Perhaps one of my most exciting classes that I taught of regional literature of the American West was up in Gillette, Wyoming in a lower elevation section of the state below 5,000 feet (Wyoming’s mean elevation is 6,700 feet!). It wasn’t exciting because of the students so much or certainly not because of me, but because of my having to fly in a university Cessna airplane from Laramie to Gillette some two hundred miles. I loved looking out the window as we gained altitude over the Laramie Plains. The Laramie River twisted and wound its way northward toward Sybil Canyon like a capillary on the skin of the earth. But it wasn’t always peaceful flying. One time it was far too windy for my nerves. Gillette Airport’s runways are facing south to north.

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Prevailing winds come out of the west. Our pilot, George Breshinsky, was a former Marine Corps pilot. When we approached the runway for a landing, the wind blew us sideways a bit off the runway and so George raised the plane upward and flew in a circle around the airport. I said, “George, I don’t *have* to teach this class. I can make it up some time later.” He said not to worry, as a marine-corps pilot he had to land jets on a tossing and rolling aircraft carriers. Again he approached the runway at a fairly sharp angle to land on one wheel first and then roll the plane over to the second wheel and roar right in. But the flight back to Laramie was much calmer and it was simply fantastic to look down on the lower constellations of Casper, Rawlins, Laramie, and Cheyenne all at the same time. By the time we approached Brees Field in Laramie, we could clearly see the megapolis lights of the Denver area way to the south.

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On another occasion we flew through a raging snowstorm up at 17,000 feet that evaporated before the snow could fall to the ground some 11,000 feet lower. It was as if we flew in our own little universe. On that flight, weird green flames danced over the wings and fuselage. “George, what the hell is that,” I shouted. “Oh nothing too unusual,” he said, “just what we call Saint Elmo’s fire caused by too much of a build up of static electricity” he said to me as I sat in the co-pilot’s seat,

“Richard, you want to take control?”

“What???”

“Yea, I want to pour myself a cup of coffee--just grab the wheel and gently take her down from 17,000 feet to 10,000 feet and then I’ll take over. Be real gentle as you move the controls at an angle not too sharp. Remember, I’m sitting right next to you.”

I somehow managed and actually enjoyed flying the

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plane downward at a slight angle by 7,000 feet at 200 knots per hour, with my eyes glued to the altimeter. I also somehow managed to teach a class that evening. I think we discussed the short fiction of Brett Harte, but I couldn't be sure.

On one other occasion, we had to let my friend and fellow faculty member Jim Wiebler off at Casper Airport so he could conduct a seminar at Casper College. We flew directly over a very foggy Casper Mountain (8,130 feet), and once on the other side, the plane dropped suddenly perhaps forty or fifty vertical feet in an air pocket. My heart went up into my throat --then came time for landing. Again I sat in the co-pilot's seat as a passenger, but George said that it was so foggy he wanted me to lean forward against the windshield to look for strobe lights—not that his instruments couldn't guide the aircraft to a safe landing, but he just wanted that extra

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bit of confirmation. I don't think I looked any harder in my life for something than I did that night. Down, down and down we went and finally I saw the faint flicker of a runway strobe light! "You're a good man," is all George said. "I hope it isn't as foggy on our way back to Casper!" Fortunately, we were able to pick up Jim under clear skies.

In one of my classes back down on the ground in Laramie, I explored the Shoshone culture of northern Wyoming—eventually I would teach classes in Native American literature—in which we looked at their "land wisdom" that included an immense knowledge of edible and medicinal plants. One of their most favorite dishes, even to this day, is chokecherry gravy served with Shoshone fry-bread and delicious elk stew. In late autumn we discovered, on our way to take a hike, a big patch of chokecherry shrubs up nearby Rogers Canyon

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just above a dried up stream-bed. We used our caps to collect as many blackish-red berries as possible to take back home, where we would pit and boil them with a bit of sugar to make a Shoshone syrup for our pancakes the next day. Our son Rich and his sisters Michelle and Maureen all delighted in this tradition of picking chokecherries each autumn during their childhood in Wyoming. They made the pancakes taste even better with a bit of a wild tinge.

When winter came roaring in like a new Ice Age with howling winds and blowing snow that piled up on prairie knolls and town streets and in front of our house, I had no other way to get to campus other than skiing on top of an otherwise impassible roads and sidewalks. The few students who showed up on such days were always surprised to see me. In the late afternoon (after classes were over), I took my bundled-up children out on the

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prairie for them to slide down prairie knolls on plastic mats. To make it even more fun, I went back to the car to get a shovel to dig a tunnel through a deep mound that we called “the seal hole.” They would come sliding down the hill to shoot through the tunnel and to come flying out the other side giggling all the way. Maura would have cups of hot Irish tea for them and homemade Irish Soda Bread* when we returned home to sit around our crackling fire. The back of our garage served as a storage for sappy scrap-wood chunks I got for free from a nearby lumber mill.

There are a few important things to expect when moving to 7,200 feet-high Laramie. During our first full summer up there, it got windy one day, real windy, fiercely windy. Dust clouds filled the western horizon like some sort of Middle East “haboob.” The thick dust succeeded in shorting out the city electrical power grid.

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Our recently planted Russian olive trees bent nearly to the ground in our front yard with each forceful gust of wind. When we could no longer see our neighbor's house across the street, we wondered if our house would blow away. Then it ended as quickly as it began except that there was no electricity. Later that night the Denver news channel said that winds had been clocked in Laramie at 105 MPH! No wonder our Native American friends from the reservation upstate said that tribal peoples never settled on the Laramie Plains, only white folk did that. But they certainly camped there during the summer months when bison had migrated up "the gangplank" from the eastern plains for lush grazing in these high grasslands.

Another thing we learned fast was making very careful use of our backyard for gardening purposes. Laramie has only ninety frost-free days of the year. It's

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like a piece of Canada placed far down into the Lower 48. There's even a species of toad that is a remnant from the last Ice Age called the Laramie Plains Toad. Apparently it thought the Ice Age never left the high plains of Wyoming. We were told by our neighbors that if we wanted to grow tomatoes in the summer, we should start them inside the basement by a south-facing window. And once June arrives, we must put these little tomato plants in rich soil within two black rubber tires right next to the house to absorb as much heat as possible heat from a shady sun. We dutifully followed our neighbor's advice, and additionally, we bravely planted baby squash plants in mounds of earth inside our manure-fed garden. The squash thrived and grew three to four times as big with beautiful deep-yellow blossoms by late June. Then it happened! A freak blizzard hit Laramie coming down from Canada and dumped eight inches of snow on June

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28th! My beautiful squash blossoms lay crushed under a wall of glacial snow. So the question is, how June is June in Laramie? We quickly learned that rhubarb and potatoes make a more suitable crop. Why? because they grow underground. As Wyoming ranchers say, “If summer comes on a weekend, let’s have a picnic!”

Laramie has a record of receiving snowfall every month of the year and many a tourist wearing short pants and a Hawaiian sports shirt has been trapped in Laramie, even early July by a seemingly “un-seasonal” snow storm. They couldn’t wait to get back to Ohio where the weather isn’t so cockeyed. We have seen it snow during the Fourth of July fireworks. But one thing early snows won’t kill is a small auto tire hung by rope from the end of a T-bar clothes-line. The children and I created a game of “pole soccer.” I would swing the tire and the kids lined up to kick a soccer ball to either hit the swinging tire for

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a half point or to kick the ball cleanly through the tire for one point. I got talked into awarding a quarter point if the soccer ball just nicked the tire. Whoever got the most points after ten kicks won the contest. Of course, once the chill winds of very late summer or early fall came along with snow that pretty much ended pole soccer. Early fall meant teaching and research, but I attempted something entirely different by, on numerous occasions, blending my being a professor with having been a ranger, the subject of the next chapter.

***For those readers interested, here is my wife's recipe for Irish Soda Bread:**

3 cups of white flour

3 teaspoons of baking powder (only 2 if you live above 7,000 feet)

1 teaspoon of salt

2 teaspoons of shortening

2 cups of fresh buttermilk

One handful of black currants

Mix together and knead the dough till ready for baking

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tray

Place in oven for 45 minutes at 450 degrees F.

Let cool with tea towel cover over bread

Slice and serve with fresh butter like Kerry Gold.

CHAPTER TWO

Outdoor Teaching at the University of Wyoming

Part I

Teaching *Desert Solitaire* at Red Rock Buttes

Of all places I had ever taught including upstate New York, New England, Italy and Japan, Wyoming seemed ideal for experimenting with outdoor teaching most especially for classes like Regional Literature of the American West and Native American Literature. I wanted to teach with the literal landscapes as a backdrop to literary landscapes of a given text somewhat like having students experience field geology, only a field geology of the mind with varying tectonic plates. As mentioned, once I received my doctorate in English, I

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was given each semester a section or two of Regional Literature of the American West. How could one teach such a class without including Edward Abbey. Naturally, we remained in the classroom for most of the time, but the landscape south of Laramie (in the Red Rock Buttes) leant itself perfectly for teaching a portion, at least, of *Desert Solitaire*.

By no means did we start the class outdoors. In fact, at the beginning of “spring” semester, I well remember school starting up after the holidays during a bad blizzard that dumped three feet of snow on the university campus. We were to begin with O.E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* that depicted the fierce blizzards in the “Dakota Territory” just after the American Civil War. But before I could discuss general themes and trends in literature of the American West, I had to get to class somehow. I did not hear on the radio

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whether classes were cancelled or not, so I faithfully dressed in a warm parka, put on my ski boots and gaiters around my legs, and clipped into my cross-country skis and grabbed a pair of ski poles. I glided down Mitchell Street and over to 7th Street and skied toward the campus a mile or so away. The wind howled and I had to ski through complete white-outs. But I didn't have to worry about cars anyway. At long last after some twenty-five to thirty minutes of skiing, I arrived at the classroom building, unclipped my skis and clip-clopped into my classroom full well expecting zero students. I was almost right, but three brave students (out of 20) sat there not expecting me to show up. I welcomed them and discussed general themes that they should look for in the authors we would later examine that included Rolvaag, Cather, Abbey, Momaday and others. One thing for sure, I said, is to look for the influence of Nature, sometimes

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fierce, sometimes gentle. The three students smiled sitting there with unzipped parkas and heavy boots. With Native American writers, you'll see a sacredness of land whether of mountains, desert or prairie. With Euro-American authors you'll see a growing awareness of the relationship of mind to land, but not after experiencing "the shock of geography" with its vast open spaces of the skin of the earth as well as its "bones" underneath. Sometimes fictional characters experience a sense of isolation and alienation. Only much later can psychic integration be seen in both fiction and non-fiction. Meanwhile the winds constantly howled and the snow continued to pile up just outside our room. They thought I was going to keep them here forever, but after thirty minutes or so, I dismissed the class and told them to go get some hot coffee and find a warm spot to sit down and read. Somewhat reluctantly, we all left the security of a

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relatively warm classroom to confront, once again, the blizzard.

Finally spring did come to Laramie and that's when I asked the class if they might not like going to a little piece of Utah called the Red Rock Buttes in the midst of the Laramie Plains to discuss Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. They all said YES. We car pooled to a spot seventeen miles south of Laramie on a relatively warm Saturday morning and hoofed across the prairie past prickly pear and pin cushion cactus, yucca, and delicate purple pasque flowers until we arrived at fantastic, bright red, layered sandstone formations and stony soil looking much like the terrain around Moab, Utah. We gathered dead sticks and branches from a mountain juniper and lit a fire in a scooped- out red sand hollow with a bit of a snow-bank not too far away for dousing the fire afterwards.

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Once we sat down in a circle and discussed Edward Abbey's total psychic integration with the Desert Southwest (something quite unusual for a native easterner) and his intense anger over industrialists who would destroy it and such feelings would lead to his writing *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. I then asked students to select a passage from *Desert Solitaire*, and read it out loud and discuss some telling features of both style and content of Abbey's book. One student appropriately selected a passage from the chapter "Rocks": "The very names are lovely—chalcedony, carnelian, jasper, chrysoprase and agate. Onyx and sardonyx, cryptocrystalline quartz. Quartzite, flint, chert and sard. Chrysoberyl, spodumene, garnet, zircon and malachite. Obsidian, turquoise, calcite, feldspar, hornblende, pyrope, tourmaline, prophyry, arkose, rutile...lithium, cobalt, beryllium, mercury, arsenic, molybdenum,

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titanium and barium...basalt, granite, gneiss, limestone, sandstone, marble, slate, gabbro, shale.” He told us just to look all around these Red Rock Buttes! You have really what Abbey is artfully attempting to re-create in words! I added to his commentary by explaining that Abbey has created for us a catalog of objects much like Whitman in “Song of Myself.” He arouses in the reader associations and sounds to create a living desert, a desert where rocks roll downslope to clink against each other: “Cryptocrystalline quartz, quartzite, flint, chert and sard.”

While our fire crackled beneath sandstone ledges, another student commented on Abbey’s love of the smell of burning sage brush and juniper as though it were incense burning as an offering to the gods. Well, I said, we have Abbey on earth, Abbey on fire, what about Abbey on ice? Students recalled Abbey first coming to his new home, a trailer house, in Arches National Park

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where he describes the cold night with wind and snow that fell like confetti. And of the clear desert air, Abbey writes from the summit of snowy Mount *Tukuhnikivats* (Paiute for “Where the Sun Lingers”) that he could see with crystal clarity a third of the state of Utah. Just then a strong gust of wind blew our campfire, with its smoke and embers, toward us and a bit beyond. We had no other choice but to douse our fire with our canteens of water and bury the embers in damp, cold sand and snow. We lingered just a bit longer to discuss Edward Abbey the man (a WWII vet) and the social rebel and agreed to examine his satire and social criticism back in the classroom the following week. Indeed *Desert Solitaire* is a fine example of grinding plates deep within Abbey’s own psyche.

II

Teaching Inside White Roots of Peace Tipi

A few years later my department agreed to have me teach a new class, namely Native American Literature. I had the good fortune of a Native American group called The White Roots of Peace coming to campus during my first week of teaching Native American Literature. They set up three or four tipis in "Prexy's Pasture," right in the middle of campus back in the mid- 1970's. I had spent time in the classroom on background information of Plains tribal cultures and their literature. On Friday of the first week of class I asked my students if they would like to visit a tipi set up by the White Roots of sPeace. By flock, I wore a pair of pants red in color that my wife had bought me for my birthday. We all entered the tipi -- twelve of us-- in clockwise (sun-wise) fashion and seated ourselves on the ground around a small but effective fire.

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I was a bit worried that my students would be cold in this outdoors class, but no, it was toasty warm. Our teacher was a Muskogee elder who looked hard at me in my red pants and then greeted us all. Not only was it comforting to hear his words about the need for us North American people to live together in peace and understanding, but it was also a real treat to sit by a small crackling fire inside a wind-proof tipi with the smoke rising straight up the center through a smoke hole.

It was a sharply cold winter day with strong winds rattling the tipi's canvas, but all of us were as pleasantly warm as if it were a bright summer day in the middle of June. Our elder explained that the Plains Indian tipi is a tightly constructed circle of canvas (in the old days bison hide) wrapped around twelve lodgepole pine poles as straight as arrows. Early-day Plains Indians would travel up into the Rocky Mountains to cut down with stone axes

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numerous skinny pine trees and haul them back down in a horse-drawn travois (poles attached over the horse's head and fanned out into a wide v-shaped cargo-hold). They would bring back enough tipi poles about eighteen feet long for a small village in the plains below. It was important for ceremonial purposes to leave a crest of branches atop each pole.

Once a suitable village site had been selected, the men lashed together tripods and then carefully added nine more poles to form a circle and repeated the process until the whole village was set up in a sacred circle with one tipi slightly outside the southern side of the circle as a sick ward to be used as needed in the warm rays of a southern sun. Bison hides were then stretched around each of the tipis with the opening always facing east toward the sacred rising sun. He said all people should really have their entrance door facing east. Wooden pegs

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were inserted in slits to seal up the entrance way at nighttime. Each of the twelve poles with branches on the top represented a lunar month. Tribal artists then got to work by painting sacred symbols on the outside of the bison hides with images of the rising sun or a herd of bison or a flock of snow geese. The old man explained to us that nothing is more comforting than to gaze up through the smoke hole at night while you're wrapped in a buffalo hide and gaze at the stars above. On another occasion, perhaps ten years later, my students would do just that up on Wind River Indian Reservation.

We all thanked the Muskogee elder and as I shook hands with him, he said he knew that a man dressed in red would bring his people into his tipi to help the process of greater understanding among peoples of North America. I hoped I would live up to his expectations if only by a fraction.

III

**Teaching *Black Elk Speaks* in a Tipi on the Flanks Of
Casper Mountain**

I taught a very memorable class one summer up at the University of Wyoming extension campus in Casper, Wyoming. My students were all adults in their thirties and forties and seemed very eager to discuss the books on their reading list. Their first book was John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* originally published in 1932. One of the students was really into tipi building and offered to set up at tipi a few thousand feet above the city of Casper not quite up to the summit of Casper Mountain that rises above 8,000 feet. We took in up on his offer and car pooled up a winding road to a high, open meadow. He had set up a beautiful canvas tipi with twelve crossed skinny lodgepole pine trunks having some

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branches left on the top high above the tipi's peak. There was plenty of room for the fourteen of us as we entered in clockwise fashion to take a seat in the circle. Our tipi man even had a small crackling fire at the tipi's center and its smoke easily escaped through the smoke hole.

I told my students that we would today read aloud and discuss Chapter Three, "The Great Vision," and discuss the rest of the book back in class the next day. But first I provided information on John G. Neihardt and his fascination with Lakota culture and that he had written *The Song of the Messiah* as part of his *Cycle of the West*. He was told by the Indian Agency that he should interview Nicholas Black Elk, holy man (wichasha wakan) of the Oglala Sioux. He met Black Elk in August, 1930. Black Elk suggested that he return to his home to listen to and record his life's story with the help of his son Ben Black Elk who would serve as a translator.

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Neihardt and his daughter Enid returned to Pine Ridge in 1931 to sit down and record the wichasha wakan's life story as translated by Ben.

As Vine Deloria Jr. writes in his introduction to a later edition of *Black Elk Speaks*, there is concern about Neihardt's own intrusions into the recording of this biography, "Can it matter? The very nature of great religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed. So let it be with *Black Elk Speaks*." We proceeded to look at some of the religious teachings in the book.

Lakota iconography had to be explained just a bit. The cardinal directions symbolic significance is of paramount importance. The North is represented by the color white as in snow geese wings. The North is a power

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for the Lakota people, a power that lets them endure the struggles in the winter of our lives. The East, is represented by the color red as in the rising sun. Its power is one of illumination and thoughtful reflection. This grandfather presented to young Black Elk the peace pipe. The South has the color yellow as with pollen and its power is re-growth and fertility. The West is black as in thunderstorms with heavy rain. Its power is that of water to make people live. The Sky above is blue where fly the wings of the air. Its power is to fly through space as in astral projection, and the Earth below is brown as with soil, ancient soil and its power (the power of the Earth) is to fly through the layers of time as a geologist must do. Black Elk could see through the wrinkles on the Sixth Grandfather's face. He knew that the Sixth Grandfather was he, himself when he would become an old man.

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There are two kinds of visions according to the Lakota, one that is sought (*Hambleycha*) and one that is given by *Tongashula* or the Great Spirit. Black Elk, as a young boy of nine (who is quite ill), is given his vision. He leaves his body to fly up in space to the Flaming Rainbow Tipi where the Six Grandfathers reside. Black Elk is given the powers of the cardinal directions (endurance, illumination, rebirth, to make live) by the first four grandfathers. The grandfather of the sky gives Black Elk the ability to transcend space through what we call today astral projection. The grandfather of the Earth appears quite old to young Black Elk, but gradually he sees the old man becoming younger and younger until he sees the old man as himself! It is almost as if age and youth commingle. In short, the sixth grandfather gives Black Elk the ability to transcend *time*. Another very significant part of the visions are horses floating in the

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sky beyond the Flaming Rainbow Tipi. They form a circle with white horse from the north, sorrel horse from the east, buckskin horses from the south and black horse from the west. When young Black Elk comes riding on a bay horse, all of the horses neigh in recognition of his presence as they gallop high above the Earth. Old Black Elk explains to Neihardt that what he has given of his vision is but the tip of the iceberg. Words fail to describe the vast intricacies of this given vision. Perhaps because the vision was too complex for Black Elk to fully comprehend, sadly, he felt that he had failed his people because they had been subjugated by living on a reservation, without their great traditions, in shambles of square, not round homes.

We started to read Black Elk's "Great Vision" aloud in sun-wise fashion inside the tipi with grand views out the eastern facing door of Casper Mountain and the

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vast space beyond. As each person took his turn to read several pages of the chapter aloud, we could begin to see things that were within the mind's that we could not have gotten any other way. We could see that Flaming Rainbow Tipi up in the sky, especially with distant thunderheads far to the north of Casper. We could sense the presence of something beyond ourselves. Each of the six grandfathers seemed ever so real. Were spirit horses neighing, or was it horses from a ranch a half mile down the road? As we read about the ascents on the good red road of peace and on the fearful black road of war, we hoped that the Lakota people would indeed have the red road in their future. The blue man of the Great Vision was more than a man but a being who brought drought to the Great Plains. And the Thunder Beings counter-reacted to bring life-giving water and hope to the people. We could feel the joy of Black Elk seeing himself as

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bringing peace and life to his people (and so he did by helping compose this great book as a thunder-being person himself). Each of us in his own way felt just a little bit different after the reading with, if only a tad, more insight into this complex book. We couldn't wait to get back to class the next day to discuss another chapter "The Horse Dance" that describes their attempt to reenact significant portions of this great vision with the help of a more mature eight years older Black Elk. A Flaming Rainbow Tipi is actually set up with six tribal elders impersonating the grandfathers of the vision. Four sets of horses, with appropriate colors representing the cardinal directions, were selected for the horse dance. When they assembled in a circle, an amazing thing happened. All the horses around Pine Ridge began to neigh! And the people of the village for a split second could see through this material world to the "real" world. But for now up

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on the high ground, we all helped take down the tipi on Casper Mountain as thunder began to rattle not so far away.

Part IV

Teaching *The Way to Rainy Mountain* at an Ancient Tipi Ring

Pulitzer Prize-winning Native American writer N. Scott Momaday not only wrote great fiction (including *House Made of Dawn* and *Ancient Child*) but also a marvelous epic poem *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) that can serve as an effective means of teaching an appreciation for Kiowa culture especially through a group reading under prairie skies. American Indian poetry, like most poetry, is meant to be read aloud. If we read *silently* any poet, whether T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, or N. Scott Momaday, printed lines alone, though

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fascinating for serious scholars, lack the vitality and forcefulness given them by the human voice; the poet's own voice is the best. However, since we rarely have the live poet present to read for us, we should make every effort possible to give heart-felt oral renditions. How so? Robert Hillyer is helpful in his commentary on reading verse aloud:

“The first obstacles to be overcome are self-consciousness and the consequent instinct to interpret rather than to present the work. One should aim to be the bow in the master's hand—not the master him-self. Any poem worthy the name has enough intensity within itself to obviate the need for dramatization” (The *First Principles of Verse*,

1950).

Inasmuch as one of Momaday's key themes is Native American appreciation for the land in which a

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person “ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience,” I came to believe that my class should do just that; we should have a group reading of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* out there on the Wyoming prairie in order to aid non-Indian students in appreciating Kiowa culture. The book itself is set in large part in Wyoming. It is an account of the great Kiowa journey over 300 years ago from Yellowstone to the open prairie of Montana and Wyoming and down through Kansas to Rainy Mountain, Oklahoma where they now live.

Of Native American and ancient Greek oral traditions, Classics scholar William Arrowsmith of Johns Hopkins University writes, “Mere anthropological transcription of myths and ceremonies in customary form is not enough, for this oral poetry depends upon performance in which tone, pause and gesture...are crucial ingredients in the narrative art and in the inflected

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meaning” (“Regionalism as Resistance,” a 1978 lecture). As a classicist who would give a great deal to know just how these Homeric poems were recited, Arrowsmith believes that Native American poetry which is still alive, still surviving here on native grounds, is the poetry which “properly interpreted and taught, might bring us closer to Homer and Hesiod and even Aristophanes than we have ever been before.”

Having heard N. Scott Momaday read from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* several times, I believed that I had to do justice to this humanistic poem at first by reading it aloud to my students *in class* by stressing its rhythmic qualities (i.e., riding horseback along the bases of mesas and cliffs). Then I had each student in the classroom read one section of the book aloud seated in a circle. But, unfortunately, while the students listened attentively, they did not discuss the poem or Kiowa

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culture with much enthusiasm, insight, or interest. *There must be some other way!* I knew that there were some ancient tipi rings just five miles north of the University of Wyoming campus, and during the warm days of early September with no signs of freak blizzards, I thought I would meet my class for three hours one Saturday morning in lieu of three classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We drove in several cars to the ancient rings and assembled in a large circle under open prairie skies. Antelope bobbed in the distance and several red-tailed hawks circled above. Our ring had a diameter of perhaps thirty feet where we all sat down. I provided some background information on Momaday (a former professor who taught at Stanford, Princeton, and Columbia Universities) and his power with words. For instance, I explained the opening section's novel portrayal of a hollow log (a symbol of Kiowa mythic

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emergence into this world) by replicating the sound of a hollow log through the poet's use of many back vowel sounds echoed in the human throat (itself a kind of hollow log): "The Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log." We started our discussion by examining some of the features of the prologue and introduction. Then we did our oral performance. I started reading:

"You know, everything had to begin, and this is how it was; The Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log. They were many more than now, but not all of them got out. There was a woman whose body was swollen up with child, and she got stuck in the log. After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowa are a small tribe in number. They looked all around and saw the world. It made them glad to see so many things. They called themselves Kwuda, coming

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out.” (It is true, said I to the students that they did come out of narrow canyons in Yellowstone.)

As we read aloud clockwise or sun-wise around the circle, I could not help but notice that my students in the midst of open prairie, read better than any inside-the-classroom group I had heard before. I applauded them as the last section of the book (XXIV) was finished. The students were enthusiastic in their discussion of the epic poem. One said, “You know the growing tree that carried the Indian child up into the sky reminds me of our own Jack in the Beanstalk story. Another said, “Grandmother Spider, taking care of twins, is somewhat like the Roman legend of the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus.” Observations and questions continued to flow until we got up to stretch our legs. Out in the prairie where land is mostly sky, we discussed the circular unity of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Everything is in threes—three parts to

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each section, three historical periods—the setting out, the going on, and the closing in—and three voices including the poet's, the tribe's and the outside historical voice. One young woman responded that perhaps there should be *four* (as in four seasons, four ages of man). Four would be a more natural number than three, especially for the Kiowa people. Another young woman responded that perhaps there *are* four voices, four periods in the book in that the whole of the book depicts more than the mythical past, the historical heyday, and the recent past; it presents to us the eternal present as opposed to the fixed past. A young man followed with a comment that the fourth voice might well be the internalized voice of the reader resulting from the three other voices reacting within the mind! I told the class that “sparks are flying.” Yes, we do have the three other voices represented by the myths and legends, the historical voice represented by the

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artist George Catlin and the anthropologists Edward Mooney as quoted by Momaday, and we have the poet's own voice constantly filtering through with personal observations of Yellowstone, of Devil's Tower, of the open prairie and Rainy Mountain itself. I read one passage aloud once again:

“One morning on the high plains of Wyoming I saw several pronghorns in the distance. They were moving very slowly at an angle away from me, and they were almost invisible in the tall brown and yellow grass. They ambled along in their own wilderness dimension of time, as if no notion of flight could even come upon them. But I remembered once having seen a frightened buck on the run, how the white rosette of its rump seemed to hang for the smallest fraction of time at the top of each frantic bound—like a succession of sunbursts against the purple hills.”

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As I came to the end of my reading, we looked out on the prairie to see distant antelope prancing under a golden sun. Is not a spiritual fourth voice invoked inside the reader or listener? Surely herein lies a manifestation of the poem's strength, further intensified by where we sat out in the open prairie just five miles away from our classroom at the University of Wyoming campus. We got up to leave the open prairie not wanting to leave it at all.

Teaching Creative Writing up in the Snowy Range

I elected to teach a five-week summer class at night in creative writing. Ten students signed up including Gary Spence, son of Gerry Spence, famous buckskin-clothed Wyoming trial lawyer and author of many books including *The Making of a Country Lawyer*. Because the sun still shone when class started, it didn't even seem like a night class. They were to write in three different genres: poetry, non-fiction prose and fiction. Some wrote haiku for the poetry, others more traditional western forms such as the rondelet, sonnet, and amulet, and some tried their hand at free verse. For non-fiction most students chose to write about current-day Wyoming as the nation's provider of natural resources. Some chose cattle ranching or geothermal features of Yellowstone as topics. Each student had a give a reading of his early draft of writing

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while others took notes and then made constructive suggestions. I did the same afterwards.

I had an idea for the fiction project. In lieu of night classes, I suggested that we meet early Saturday morning and drive up in two cars to the Snowy Range some forty miles to the west of town. I explained that we would be going to the site of an old silver mine with its shaft, deep pit, and rusted mining machinery. I suggested that they compose a draft of a story about this old mine of the 1880's after they walked around the site to get a feel for it. They were to depict what happened up here and why did they leave. They all chose a spot to sit down and begin writing. We would all give a summary of our intended plot, myself included, and we would read aloud our final drafts in class the following week. Of course, if they wished to send them off for possible publication, they would have to create an even more polished form

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after the class was finished.

Saturday morning came and off we drove across the rolling prairies west of Laramie, past the old wagon train ruts of the Overland Trail to Oregon, through the old mining town of Centennial at 8,000 feet with its charcoal mills still in operation. Onward and upward we drove into the Snowies past lingering snowfields within the dense spruce-fir forests and up through dwarf forests just below tree-line above 10,500 feet and finally to the lower site of the old silver mine at around 10,000 feet, not quite two miles above sea level. Once there, we parked on the shoulder of the road and dashed down to the mine shaft and rusty machinery to have a look. I asked the students if they were beginning to get any ideas for a piece of fiction. Most of them simply nodded and sat down in their parkas to begin writing. I chose a spot and did the same. We could easily have been somewhere

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in the high country of Nevada or California and hopefully would have the success of a Mark Twain or Bret Harte, if the mosquitoes didn't bother us too much. After several hours, we returned to Centennial for hamburgers and pop and shared some of our ideas. Two or three planned to write historical fiction after researching a bit on Wyoming's silver mining a century or more ago. Others wanted to write a kind of true mystery a la Gerry Spence. We all looked forward to next Wednesday night when we would read our drafts aloud in a circle. I would simply share a plot summary of mine and am now sharing it here in this book:

IV

Silver Fever in a High Country (after Jack London's

“In a Far Country”)

Jake dreamed of impish voices speaking to him and

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awakened to humming mosquitoes and plaintive notes from tiny frogs in clumps of alpine marshes high above hazy Wyoming valleys. Grassy mounds bedecked with miniature bug-ridden flowers absorbed the strong sun outside his cabin window. If only those hissing mosquitoes would blow away to the snowfields of higher jagged ridges. Bugs were going to get the better of him, he knew, up at the mine. But if he planned it right, they just might get the better of his partner in this high country. Bill, his fellow miner, busied himself turning gooey flapjacks on a pan and brewing some strong mountain coffee. They both sat down and poured brown sugar syrup over the flapjacks and ate like horses and swilled coffee as though it were the first cup they had during their six week's stay. With his stomach full and his mind somewhat relaxed after another disturbing night of noisy mosquitoes, he and his partner trudged up the

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hill by a flower-lined creek to the mine pit.

“Just a few more days, Jake, and we should hit pay-dirt.”

“Well, I hope so. This place up here sort of give me the willies—especially the past few nights. I ain’t been sleepin’ right. Been hearin’ little voices or something.”

“Oh, it’s just because y’er anxious to get that silver, Jake, that’s all.”

Jake complained of hearing mosquitoes all night long. He grimaced and whispered, “*Those voices, those impish voices.*”

“Yep, Jake. Ya take this here ore from the pit we’ve dug and crush it out with our little machine, why...”

Jake whispered, “*What was it those voices were trying to say? Something—no, it couldn’t be that we humans...*”

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“Jake, I think we’ve got somethin’ down there.

Take a looksey, will ya?

Whispering again, Jake mumbled, “*We humans are very much under the rule of insects, and those tiny frogs...*”

“Jake, fer Christ sake stop lookin’ so bu-eyed and take this here ore—look at it! See the silver specks?”

“What do specks prove?” he asked his partner Bill and then whispered, “*It doesn’t take long for a man to lose what he thinks sets him apart—apart from those impish voices.*”

“Jake, are you ill or somethin’?”

“Naw, Bill, I just been thinkin’. Not Thinkin’-thinkin’ but some other kind—don’t know how to explain.”

A whole swarm of mosquitoes came, and he quickly left with them running down the hill like crazy while Bill climbed out of the pit shouting, “Jake, Jake, come back

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here you damn fool.”

Bill knew Jake wasn't the right partner for him long before they came to these snowy mountains in search of silver. Jake's heart never seemed to be in it. Still, he wondered where Jake ran off to. But no siree, he was too busy to look for his damn fool partner. He had those rock chunks to put through the steam-powered crusher. Then he had to gather together all of the bright specks that would be separated from the rock in the slue.

Evening caught Bill unawares as he finished crushing rocks for the day. He scooped together all the specks of silver into a big gunny sack that would make him rich once he got back to the assay office in Laramie. His heart palpitated. Maybe he should never have mentioned to Jake that he had a weak heart. That Jake, what a fool to go running off into the woods! Was he still alive? Was he playing some trick? Who cares if a fool

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doesn't want his fair share!

Back at his cabin, Bill took out of the cupboard some canned lima beans and diced ham. He threw a lump of butter into a weathered pot, dumped the grub into it and heated it up on a wood fire outside the cabin. "Yes siree, after I get my silver, I'll harness up the mules and pack the wagon to head down the Libby Creek Trail to the Plains of Laramie," Bill said to himself. He dumped his steaming meal on to his dented tin plate and savored each morsel. He always thought lima beans had potatoes inside of them when he was a kid. He stared out the window to watch the cold snowy mountains darken in silence except for the snowfields that seemed to give off their own bluish light under the crescent moon. As evening chill slithered into his cabin, he crawled under some tattered horse blankets.

"What's the matter with that damn fool Jake? Is he

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trying to give me a heart attack over worryin.’?” Bill wondered if there actually was something to Jake’s hearing voices. But a man’s imagination up here in a high country can take over if he doesn’t watch out.

Bill rolled and tossed on his hard bunk bed with stars peeping through a glassless window. But his mind lingered in the bright daylight back in Nebraska where he had met Jake outside the Union Pacific Terminal in Omaha.

“Where ya headed,” Bill asked a pensive stranger on a sunny platform.

“Laramie, partner,” Jake replied as he noticed Bill rubbing his chest.

“Ya heard about the discovery of silver out in Centennial, Mr...?”

“Jake Brusher’s the name.”

“Bill. Bill Stewart here.”

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“Yes sir, Bill, I’ve heard about the boom and quit teachin’ a bunch of Indians in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and decided to do somethin’ worth while.”

“Well, there ya are Mister Brusher. Me, too. I quit repairin’ steamboat engines in Cincinnati. Thought I’d put my expertise toward makin’ good money, not just toyin’ around,” he said rubbing his chest.

They smoked rum cigars as they raced across rolling Nebraska with its sparkling Platte River keeping them company as they advanced westward.

“What was it like teachin’ a bunch of Indians?”

“Strange, that’s what. Some of them never showed up to class ‘cause they didn’t like dissectin’ frogs. Said they were sacred critters because they kept their bellies full of fly-in-the sky demons.”

Bill tossed on his very hard bunk at the thought of fly-in-the-sky demons. Then he saw a thousand of them with

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little faces resembling Jake's. But he realized he was really looking out the train window and seeing Jake's face reflected on it several times from a mirror in the coach.

“Well, Jake, I worked with float-in-the-boat demons, a bunch of over-anxious buzzards. Every time their engines got over-worked haulin' coal upriver, they'd come whimperin' to me. Well if ya'd stop haulin' so damn much coal—more than the boat could take—it wouldn't keep breakin' down!”

The train roared over dry land prairie with a few sod huts in the distance. God it was lonely looking country out there. Bill slapped a mosquito on his neck and woke up shouting, “Insects, damn insects!” He got up under the cold stars to fix some coffee to settle his nerves, but only caused a palpitation of his heart. Why so many mosquitoes? Isn't it too cold for them?

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Since the sky **never** seemed to lighten, he returned to bed and his horse blankets and dozed off again thinking, half dreaming of their stay in Laramie at the Johnson Hotel. They walked over to the Union Pacific repair shop and bought a small old engine no longer in use to cart it off to those glittering mountains west of town. Both of them invested their years of savings in this old engine, a couple sets of mules, an old steel-rimmed wagon, shovels, pick-axes and staple food stuffs.

“God, this prairie’s a lonesome place, Bill,” Jake mused as they slowly inched their way across a vast space leaving Laramie behind to the east. “So damn much emptiness—a place fit for Indians, but sure as heck not for us!”

“Awh, Jake, wait till we get all that silver ore up there!”

“Bill, I’m not so sure **‘up there’** will be any better

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than this God-forsaken place.

“Jake, think of the silver!”

Bill woke up in the cabin slapping another mosquito on his forehead, but it was still pitch dark with no Jake! He didn't want to get up again and be all by himself under those cold stars. He closed his eyes. He and Jake passed a few mining camps down by Centennial and continued to climb way up near Libby Flats when the mule team stumbled over and kicked aside some quartzite with glittering silver specks in it.

“Jake, here's our spot! Let's set up camp and get a digging.' There's plenty of trees to build our shelter. Won't be fancy, but it will be a shelter.”

Mosquitoes and bugs swarmed all over this high country.

“Don't ya think we should keep goin' higher to a cooler, less buggy area?”

“Naw, Jake, this is the spot, besides any higher and

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my old ticker would really feel it.” As Bill peacefully relived their six-week adventure of building a crude mountain cabin, digging a pit some seven-feet deep and setting up their crusher above a sluice of water, all of the sudden he heard a hideous **shriek** and instantly felt clammy paws all over his face and body. Crazy Jake had thrown a gunny sack full of little insect-eating frogs onto poor Bill who gasped for breath and felt a stabbing pain move up his arm to his chest. Just what Jake hoped for! He had the perfect excuse for going back to Laramie alone with all that crushed silver ore—his poor partner died of a heart attack, that’s all. No one would suspect foul play. Why he even gave him a decent burial in their mining pit covered with chunks of quartzite and dirt.

But to Jake’s dismay, his loud shriek just an hour ago had sent all the mules galloping away with their reins still attached.

CHAPTER THREE

High Plains Rambles

Part I

How Prairie Can a Prairie Be?

Sometimes after long departmental meetings (one department member had the habit of belching when he disagreed with something) or a tiring day of teaching English Composition (I didn't always get creative writing to teach), I would come home, change clothes and go out on the prairie with Maura and the kids for what came to be known as the great circle walk just north of our home. We'd simply enjoy the walk for its own sake, but surely the views of the distant Snowy Range made it more than that. Sometimes the kids would find pretty stones or a

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piece of gnarled, sun-bleach wood, or even an old Wyoming license plate from the 1930's. Once Maura picked up an old button that she wished could speak and tell her its story. One of my colleagues in the English Department by the name of Tom Francis told me that one time he took a walk on the prairie east of town and saw something shiny. He picked it up to see that it was an old silver dollar coin minted in the 1870's! Another colleague, Walter Edens, found numerous arrow points and even an old stone with serrated edges that helped the ancient ones in skinning hides. As my family and I walked along, we hoped we might catch sight of distant antelope or a romping coyote. But always I felt fully refreshed after a full day at the university. We got to know this great circle trail well and even took nighttime walks without a flashlight by learning to feel the stony path under our feet or by using the light of a full moon.

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After we lived in Laramie for about ten years, some close friends of ours, Gordon, Jean and their son Walt Fader came out to visit us one summer and especially wanted to experience the open prairie since they were from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania where the sky is not as expansive. It was their first time ever to visit the state of Wyoming, though they had visited a place near their home called Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania. That first night I wasn't sure if they would like to try walking out on the prairie after dark, but when I asked them, they said they would be delighted to give it a try because they had never done such a thing. They anxiously put on their stout walking shoes. A half moon shone brightly in a spectacular the prairie sky filled with a vast array of sparkling stars. We hopped into my old Chevy Blazer and proceeded north of town on 9th street up over a prairie rim where the lights of Laramie spread

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out and twinkled like stardust. But my wife and I wanted to take them beyond the city lights into pure prairie skies with no “light pollution.” We knew just where to turn off the paved road onto the beginning of a dirt road we called the great circle walk that spanned over three miles. I deliberately left the flashlight in the glove box of the car and opened the doors to let everyone out, and I told them to follow me for about forty yards until the car no longer remained visible in the dark.

Maura said, “Look up at that stunning show of stars!” The stars, moon, and Jupiter gave just enough light to provide our friends the dim outline of a prairie landscape. The pungent smell of fresh June sagebrush refreshed us all on the dimly lit prairie.

Then I said, “Okay, Gordon, Jean, and Walt, here’s where the fun begins. We’re going to follow the dirt road for a three-mile circle back to the car. If you no longer

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feel the gravel of the road under your shoes, move your foot around in a circle until you feel the road again and try to stay on the road.”

At first they kept losing the road by going off into sage brush or prairie grasses, but soon enough they felt their way back to the curving dirt road. Perhaps they had stared up at the brilliant Milky Way too much to concentrate on the feel of the ground below. Eventually all of us managed both to enjoy the panorama of sky as well as to use our feet as ground sensors to stay on the ever-bending road. I told the Faders that only last summer I had gone up to the Wind River Indian Reservation to visit my Shoshone friend Rupert Weeks who had taught me how to stay on a nighttime trail without a flashlight. “Use your feet as a pair of eyes at ground level,” said Rupert. We were going to see nighttime petroglyphs carved in sandstone walls lit up by

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the moon.

Within an hour or so we got so busy talking that we had to let our feet sensors operate automatically without thinking about it. By the time we did our three miles and reached the car and I turned on the flashlight, so all could easily get seated. Gordon remarked how a flashlight sort of cheapens the nighttime beauty of the open prairie and how glad he was that we did not use it out there where Nature rules. The lights of Laramie almost hurt our eyes.

Once we got back to the house, Maura quickly set the table for an evening spread of fresh baked Irish soda bread served with butter and homemade prairie chokecherry jam along with cups of hot Irish tea. On the next day we would revisit our nighttime trail during broad daylight to see it all from a different perspective, including cactus here and there and pointy yucca not far

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off trail. There is nothing like pan-fried de-spined cactus for breakfast or boiled and mashed yucca root as a substitute for mashed potatoes. The prairie provided much for the Plains Indians both in edible vegetation and in fire-roasted antelope or deer rump. Here in the Laramie Plains flows the twisting Laramie River that provided fresh trout, caught by the Arapaho in weirs made of woven willow branches. Today many a fisherman enjoys catching German brown trout or rainbow trout in this twisting river of the Laramie Plains. The prairie provided food for thought for the Fader family.

Euro-Americans first settled in Laramie in the mid 1860's to help construct the Union Pacific Railway that was completed in 1869 from Chicago to Oakland, California. Before the railroad there were a number of old trails first used by early pioneers in the 1850's who

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headed ever westward for California and the Oregon territory. One of them was called The Overland Trail. One spur of this trail went from Cheyenne to Laramie over the Laramie Range; part of that trail was later used as a stagecoach route to deliver mail and supplies before the railroad was completed.

My father and I on one early autumn day decided to hike on this old stagecoach route from the east end of town at Sherman Hills Estates up to the top of Sherman Hill some 1,500 feet above the city. The day started out fine, even slightly balmy. As we zig-zagged up Sherman Hill following a very rocky trail, the temperature dropped a bit and we shed our parkas to add sweaters for extra warmth underneath the parkas. We gradually came up into a scattered pine forest with strands of kinnicknick covering the ground. Since my father was a pipe smoker, I told him that the Indians used this plant as a wild

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tobacco by drying its tiny wax-like leaves and crushing them into their stone pipe bowls. For flavor, they added corn silk and shreds of the inner bark of young elm trees. We gathered some kinnickinick to dry them out for a month or two, but after the wild tobacco was ready, my father tried it but didn't enjoy this new smoke nearly as much as a pouch of John Middleton tobacco. Finally, we reached the top of Sherman Hill where the wind had grown considerably stronger and the temperature had dropped perhaps ten degrees. From up here we could see the whole town of Laramie and the University of Wyoming campus. Rolling prairie hills spread in the distance up to the Medicine Bow Mountains (The Snowy Range). The old Overland Trail skirted around these mountains on its route to far away Oregon. Henry Thoreau followed such a trail in his mind as he walked in the Concord woods and fields in his favorite direction,

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northwesterly toward Oregon, so he declares in his essay “Walking.”

An approaching storm forced our retreat down Sherman Hill past hard, crunchy rocks and cactus. About half way down, the storm hit with full fury. Sleet stung our faces and hands making them feel as though a thousand needles had pricked them. Our only solution was to walk backwards into the fierce wind. Walking backwards is no real problem unless you’re going downhill over unseen rocks! After a half dozen falls, we managed, at last, to get to level ground and crawl into our car and head back to my Mitchell Street home—a far cry from Princeton, New Jersey, my parents hometown. We began to understand the prairie a bit more that day. My father, incidentally, had retired from Princeton University to open up a mail-order rare books business in my basement until the collection sold off at which point my

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father and mother would retire in the sunny and warm Southwest. In the meantime it was comforting to know that such a thing as a first edition of Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia* was on the shelves of my basement not far from the wild prairies of Wyoming.

II

A Cross Country Skiing Descent into the Prairie

Two of our friends and their families (the Robinsons and the Wieblers) joined us to make a group eleven people (minus Maura and Judy Robinson who had to study for exams). Our mission? –to ski down a lateral canyon that parallels Telephone Canyon with Interstate 80's humming traffic. We left two cars down in east Laramie just off I-80 and drove two SUV's with all of us packed in along with our ski gear to drive up to the Happy Jack exit and turn right just above the parallel canyon to get

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out our skis, poles, boots and backpacks with nice lunches in each.

Big Jim Wiebler started to sing auf Deutsch some German folksongs as we all clipped onto our skis. My three children and I, along with Joe Robinson and his daughters, followed Jim and Fran Wiebler with their two daughters. We arranged all this at the faculty coffee house on campus a few weeks earlier, and we all looked forward to this wild, trail-less adventure. We quickly descended a steep slope swirled with mounds of snow in mid-January and whizzed past jack pine trees as though we had become sailing hawks. Jim continued to sing out loud as jolly as could be.

“Oh-oh,” Jim shouted.

“What’s wrong,” I shouted down to him.

“The canyon has divided into two smaller canyons! Which one should we take, Richard?”

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I noticed that the one to the right followed too closely in its descent the noisy interstate highway with big semi's gearing down to sound like grunting dinosaurs. So I suggested we hook to the left. Surely that canyon won't come out on the Laramie Plains too far away from the other.

“Right you are!” shouted Jim.

Joyfully, we eleven all veered to the left and whizzed along passing a herd of antelope who simply stared in wonderment at these gliding humans. We descended dancing right and left at a fairly good speed, sometimes getting hung up on concealed sage brush. Joe came whizzing into a small aspen grove and tried to push aside branches only to have them snap on each side of him giving him the look of some big bull elk with two antlers. We all roared with laughter after he came to a rather jarring halt. Boy, it had gotten cold! I guessed we should

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be half way down the canyon to Laramie, but it seemed to take a good bit longer than I had anticipated.

Finally, an hour later, we could barely discern the Laramie Plains below. Fran suggested we take a break because she carried a surprise for us in her backpack. We all leaned against some stunted pines in a forest surrounding us as she poured hot chocolate into paper cups for all the children.

“Where’s ours?” asked Joe Robinson.

“Not to worry!” Fran shouted. She proceeded to pour brandy into cups for each adult and said “Cheers!” But where is Jim? After a few more minutes I shouted “Wo ist Herr Wiebler?” and from the distance we all heard “Ich bin hir!” Apparently one of his ski poles broke in two and he had to go scouting for a good branch as a substitute. At last he skied down-slope to us with one pole and one aspen branch to receive his cup of brandy.

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What a gal that Fran is to have brought brandy! Brandy hit the spot as we shoved off to ski ever downward at a fast clip until we reached the valley floor of the Laramie Plains. We had descended 1,500 vertical feet to get back to the 7,200 foot-level. But wait a minute! Was that the cement plant we saw far across the way? Since the cement plant is a good seven miles south of town, we knew we were all in for a long overland journey to make it back to our two cars.

I hadn't realized how many icy rills and knolls and gullies a winter prairie has! It all looked weirdly similar to the winter landscape outside of Reykyavik, Iceland. As the children started to complain --it was no longer a fun adventure, --good old Fran stopped, and pulled out of her pack candy bars for all of us. This was a much better choice than the cans of sardines that I brought! We skied up and down icy ravines like a group of Inuits hunting for

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seals for what seemed like hours. The sun began to set. Where the hell is Laramie? Finally, under dark sky, one by one, each person of our expedition of eleven skied through backyards of peoples' homes just off the interstate highway. One gentleman came out onto his back porch and shouted "Where the hell have all you guys come from?" Joe Robinson, in a mirthful mood, shouted at the top of his lungs "Fort Collins!" We all roared with laughter. We had skied far, but not that far. Fort Collins, Colorado is sixty-five miles to the south. Nonetheless, we all felt as though we had skied sixty-five miles instead of ten. It was a pleasurable moment to crowd into our cars and drive back up to get the other two heavily frosted vehicles looking like something out of *Dr. Zhivago*, and drive back to our home for a nice meal that my wife and Judy Robinson helped prepare in our long absence. I guess they wondered why it took so

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damn long to ski down a three-mile canyon.

III

A Strange Unearthly Ranch

My former graduate student and assistant editor of the *Thoreau Journal Quarterly*, Greg Bean, took a position with *The Casper Star Tribune* as a reporter. He wanted to cover the story of Pat McGuire's barley ranch due east of Bosler, Wyoming at the northern end of the Laramie Plains just about at the entrance to Sybil Canyon, itself a strange place, especially at nighttime, where the Arapaho Indians performed mysterious ceremonial rites in earlier times. Naturally, Greg invited me and a *Casper Star* infra-red photographer to come along and camp on a ridge just above McGuire's ranch where we could easily walk down the stony knoll to interview Pat McGuire. Why this particular rancher? He allegedly had been

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contacted by UFO's and some of his cattle had been terribly mutilated during the 1970's. Pat had been interviewed the previous year by Leo Sprinkle who had also put a New Hampshire couple, Barney and Betty Hill, under hypnosis as they claimed to have been abducted by ufolk, or UFO people.

Though I was a bit hesitant about going to such a place with its cock and bull stories, I said that I would go just to see what's what—that is, what's beneath the surface of seeming reality. What we were to experience up near Bosler was, perhaps, too unbelievable to be printed as a news story in *The Casper Star Tribune*, but his story did appear in the Sunday, June 29, 1980 issue of that paper. His approach was to try to describe very unusual blinking lights and weird, jerky movements in impossible patterns up and down and sideways of some UFO's in the skies above McGuire's ranch. We three

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arrived at this lonely ranch with all of McGuire's family constituting a population greater than the town of Bosler, but not greater than that of the vast antelope community. We quickly busied ourselves with setting up our tents on a high prairie ridge overlooking his trailer house, well, and utility buildings so that we would have an unobstructed view.

We chatted with all of his children who had seen UFO's hovering right over their trailer house and small calves being invisibly lifted up into the spacecraft. Pat later explained that he thought that the "ufolk" wanted to examine cow organs for any radioactive pollution caused by humans over the years of testing nuclear weapons since radioactive fallout had a half life of 99 years. He asked us to get ourselves back up there on the ridge because, he said, you never know what you might see. We thanked Pat for allowing us to come and to be

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interviewed for a newspaper story. We brewed some coffee and sat outside our tents and noticed in the distance a dust devil forming somewhere the other side of Bosler. In the meantime irregular gusts of wind played strange whistling tunes as it blew through our exterior tent poles. Weird clouds formed to the east over Sybil Canyon that resembled biblical patriarchs with long white beards. Those clouds hovered over us all afternoon.

The dust devil snaked its way slowly toward the McGuire ranch and finally came right up the prairie ridge to knock down one of our tents! We quickly set it up again to have gusts of wind play strange tunes with our hollow tent poles. Again another dust devil formed way out by Bosler. It snaked its way toward us and came up the ridge to knock down the same tent for the second time. We began to get not only frustrated but damn mad. We set up the tent again as a third dust devil formed in

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the distance. This time all three of us stood up and held on to the tent with all our might. The third dust devil snaked its way right up to us and lifted the three of us and the tent off the ground forcing us to roll down the back side of the ridge. We laughed out loud saying McGuire's UFO's are made of canvas!

I thought to myself if "ufolk" really exist they sure as heck have a sense of humor. We had some supper and continued talking with Pat until it became dark, but nothing else happened until 3 AM when a five-minute dance of multicolored UFO's took place. Pat insisted that they deliberately put on a show for us. Their gyrations were so quick and erratic that Richard, the infrared photographer, could never quite get a focus on them. And at a very early morning hour Pat invited us to drive with him out to his irrigation system to see if it was still working effectively. He then related to us that after he

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bought this land, he wondered how he could grow anything without sufficient water. He consulted with university geologists where he should drill his well. They suggested that he drill at least ten different bore sights and surely one of them would hit water. But along came the “ufolk” who explained in *thought* language (not English or other human languages) that he should drill at one specific spot. They explained to him that the Earth Planet has more underground rivers than those above ground and that one river flowed right under his ranch from the far north with billions of gallons of melted glacial waters from the last Ice Age. He drilled one well only at their suggested spot and he hit a gusher just 100 feet down. It gushed so much water that he eventually bought a tank engine to pump it out with force and it was this glacial water that irrigated his crop of high country barley, grown in circles with huge sprinklers on wheels

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that moved around in a giant circle. After harvest, he sold his high country barley to Coors Brewery.

Our minds buzzed with an overflow of unbelievable data somehow made believable. We didn't quite know how to process it—it was too complex, and too strange. After the next day's sunrise, we thanked the McGuires profusely and returned to Laramie for lunch at my house. Maura said that we all looked very strange and distant. She had never seen three people who behaved quite as we did as though we had arrived from some other galaxy. It took us all afternoon to regain our earthly composure after this visit to a strange, unearthly ranch twenty miles to the north. Pat has since passed away and his family returned to their original home in Wheatland. His wife remarried and the kids are all grown up now and scattered to the four corners. His ranch (with unpaid federal loans) is behind barbed wire with no trespassing

signs.

IV

An Encounter with Inverse Gravity:

A Short Story

I stood alone out on the empty, lunar prairie five miles north of Laramie looking at antelope, jack rabbits, and sage hens. But then something like a large globule of mercury expanded out of a canyon and contracted itself in the sky just to the south. It formed itself into a disk and remained stationary perhaps one hundred feet above the earth. “What the hell is this,” I shouted aloud from my lunar-looking perch. A black sort of periscope rose out of the globule and I immediately sensed that I was an object of scrutiny. It must have had some kind of intelligence within it because I had the urge to converse with it and ask questions in both English and French.

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“What’s your method of propulsion,” I asked.

It didn’t answer in words but with vibrations that made me feel a little dizzy. I think it responded with something like “inverse gravity.”

“Inverse what??”

It repeated “Inverse gravity. We beam in on your gravitational field and magnetically invert it. Once we do that we can hold your gravity in check by simply repelling its magnetic charge and then stand still in your sky, or, by easing up on the inversion, we can increase our speed to any desired level: six kilometers per hour or six kilometers per second or six kilometers per one millionth of a second to give you the appearance of an expanding globule of mercury, as you described it. Call it magnertia if you will.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Are you trying to play the tough guy or

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something? To tell the truth we just needed a gravitational field to sling out with. Your *'what the hell'* attitude is hardly of any interest to us. You are nothing more than humanoid dinosaurs to us, but, I'll give you credit, you have attempted in your own crude way to speak with us."

Its black periscope grew smaller on the horizon as the globule gained speed and stretched south over Laramie's skies where it began to look more and more like gray lenticular clouds. I walked back toward my car and passed a snowfield that hadn't been there two hours before—surely it had not snowed.

"What the heck is going on here," I said out loud. The snowfield lingered two inches above the ground and settled with a **thunk**, like two layers of the Earth coming together perhaps too fast. Prairies are usually prairies until you catch them off guard. I guess I wasn't supposed

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to be out there this time. Usually it's antelope, jack rabbits, and sage hens under a setting sun or rising moon.

“Oh-oh, where's my car? Where the heck is my car?”

It had become so dark I couldn't see my car, but just then I noticed a faint star glint on its windshield.

I made it back to Laramie alright but couldn't explain to my wife why my forty-five minute walk on the prairie --just to get some air -- turned into three or four hours. All I could say was that I guess I caught the prairie off guard and it inverted my brain waves into some sort of time warp. Usually it's antelope, jack rabbits, and sage hens.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Medicine Bow Mountains and Beyond

Each Labor Day for ten years straight my family and I would climb to the sky from Lewis Lake following a winding trail through patches of willows hiding gurgling streams with clear and icy water feeding roots of marsh marigolds and patches of bright and shining glacier lilies.

We'd squeeze past narrow walls of rock glistening with flecks of mica and quartzite until we arrived at a stony plateau high above the shining Snowy Range lakes with Medicine Bow Peak rising way above.

Then we traversed back and forth on many switchbacks below the snow and stood to gaze at the lower Sugar Loaf across the valley.

Here and there marmots and pikas scurried with high pitched squeaks in-between the rocks.

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Blocking our path, lay a steep-pitched snowfield, and out came our indispensable walking sticks to steady us at a slant just below the peak.

Up through a rocky crevice, we at last stood on a ridge of wobbly boulders leading ever upward to granitic Medicine Bow Peak itself, with a view for miles in any direction that rosy finches flew.

R. Fleck, *Mountains on My Mind*

Part I

Climbing

Forty miles to the west of Laramie loom the Medicine Bow Mountains up to a tad over 12,000 feet. They extend southward into Colorado where they are known as the Rawah Range. Locally they are called the Snowies because they remain white all year long. In the old days the trails westward skirted around this bow of mountains to the high desert beyond where the Continental Divide,

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instead of being rugged alpine terrain, is nothing more than a high hump in the desert that rises to a mere 7,000 feet due west of Rawlins. From there it was and is pretty much clear sailing to Salt Lake City. It is no small wonder that the Union Pacific Railroad back in 1869 chose this route to lay tracks west of Laramie rather than forge through the rugged Colorado Rockies to the south with passes above 11,000 feet.

For us and all Laramites, the Snowies are a bit of Switzerland close by. Up there in the high country are fishing streams and lakes, hiking trails along and up over ridges to the deep basins northward. There are campgrounds at Lewis Lake and Brooklyn Lake where rainbow trout rise in the light of the moon. But the most fun of all is the Medicine Bow Ski Area with green, blue, and black trails for the entire family. We took advantage of all of the above during our twenty-five year residence

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in Laramie (save for a few visiting professorships elsewhere).

They say you're not a true Laramite until you have caught a trout, climbed Medicine Bow Peak (12,003 feet) and learned to ski. Maura and I climbed the peak first and then learned how to fish and ski. Our first climb came before we had kids in 1965. We drove to the Lewis Lake Campground at around 10,500 feet and slipped on our day packs filled with hearty sandwiches, water, and oranges. We crossed over a bright, clear stream and followed the trail along the western shoreline of the lake. Wildflowers grew in profusion: bright red Indian paintbrush, yellow glacier lilies, blue harebells, purple penstemon, and bright golden marsh marigolds. Were we inside a Claude Monet painting? Squawking ravens helped snap us out of our trance. The trail suddenly bounded upwards at a steep angle and between narrow

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chutes of gray granite ridges. Though it was mid- July, a large patch of snow lined the edge of our upward trail until we reached a flat plateau that separated Lewis Lake basin from Mirror Lake. We ate some oranges at this resting spot before proceeding up into a rocky ridge with multiple switch-backs along our steep trail that led us high above tree line at 11,500 feet (as opposed to 10,500 feet in Montana and to only sea level at the Arctic Circle). The top of Sugar Loaf Hill rose directly south bare of trees but laced with shining chunks of white quartz giving it the appearance of a sugar loaf. *Years later I climbed this “loaf” with Herve Picherit, son of our friend Jean-Louis Picherit, Professor of French. We had wanted to climb Medicine Bow Peak, but the road was closed to Lewis Lake. Instead, we free-lanced our way across to the south side of Sugar Loaf and worked our way to the summit in about a half hour. Herve put*

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some of the quartz crystals into his day-pack for his collection. We had a superb view of Medicine Bow Peak just across the way.

Maura and I proceeded ever upward, zig-zaging like mountain goats until we reached a deep and slanting snowfield with hikers steps made through it. We held hands tightly as we crossed this fifty-yard wide patch of icy snow to dry trail once again. *Much later, when we lived in Denver, we came up to climb this mountain with our friend Margie Reis. It was exactly at this point that I said to Margie to wait at the bottom of the snowfield while I guided Maura across. Then I would come back and guide Margie across. To our dismay she proceeded upwards by herself, slipped and slid down to a narrow ledge below that shielded her from a thousand-foot drop on the other side. She screamed and shouted for me. I told Maura to stand still knowing that she, too, was*

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frightened to death. I carefully stepped through the slanted snow down to Margie, grabbed her hand and pulled her to safety away from that narrow ledge that saved her life. All three reunited, I urged Maura and Margie to continue on to the summit explaining that if they didn't go to the top, Margie would never go up to the mountains again. My idea worked especially after we skirted around the edge of the snowfield on the way back rather than faithfully following the tracks through the snow.

Maura and I (during our first ascent) successfully climbed up through broken rim-rock to the highest snow-covered flat ridge that angled gently toward the very summit of a pile of rocks with a bench mark of 12,003 feet.

It was just below the summit that a United Airlines prop plane from Denver to Salt Lake City crashed in fog

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during 1955. A rescue team attached cables at the summit to repel down to the wreckage to search for any survivors. Unfortunately all sixt-six people were killed. Pieces of wreckage remain perhaps five hundred feet below the summit. Though Maura was a bit scared by that angular snowfield just below the ridge, she otherwise thoroughly enjoyed this alpine experience, especially with its view northward of Elk Mountain, the town of Rawlins, and the desert beyond that would have inspired John Muir. To the south we could see into Rocky Mountain National Park's snowy landscapes, to the east distant Laramie nestled in the Laramie Plains, and to the west the Sierra Madre Range, slightly lower than where we stood.

I led Rich on his fifth birthday up Medicine Bow Peak—he was fine until I had to carry him across that angular snowfield and had a hard time convincing him to

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continue up through the rim rock to a flat snowfield with its view of distant Elk Mountain, He did continue on his own steam, after receiving my help on that angular snowfield, by scampering up the trail to the snowy summit. The expression on his face was a wonderful mixture of fear, delight, weariness, and joy. We high-fived it and carefully worked our way back down to the flower-lined Lewis Lake and our car. He was one proud five-year-old boy! I treated him to an old-fashioned hamburger at the Old Corral in Centennial.

Through the years we followed the ritual of climbing Medicine Bow Peak with fellow faculty and their children each Labor Day. Our daughters, Michelle and Maureen, loved climbing this 12,000-foot snowy hump with other children who would all sit in a circle on the summit to enjoy their lunch and soda pop that popped like a volcano at this elevation (especially if it had been

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canned at sea level). On several occasions Klaus Hansen of the German Department and his family joined our pilgrimage with the Wiebler and Robinson families. We were the only family with a son; Rich, who was quite literally surrounded by eight girls including his sisters. Perhaps he enjoyed his first climb at age 5 more than any other. But he always enjoyed being in a nine-way snowball fight at the summit. We adults sat in a circle (occasionally being hit by a stray snowball) to plan ahead for the winter-break cross country ski trips in the valleys below.

II

Skiing

The Wieblers, Flecks, and Robinsons set aside one day during the Christmas holiday for a more peaceful cross country ski trip than our previous jaunt down an

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unnamed canyon to the Laramie Plains from Happy Jack. This time we skied just five miles from Upper Barber Lake Road at 10,000 feet down to the Barber Lake Lodge at an altitude of 9,000 feet just above Centennial Village. Fran, as usual, packed some brandy and chocolate, while the rest of us took along hotdogs, rolls, and potato chips and thermoses of coffee and hot chocolate for a bit of a feast cooked on an open fire in the midst of the snowy woods. We left two cars up top and two at the lodge.

We hopped out of our cars at the top and bundled up, put on our backpacks and quickly followed the girls (Nicki, Marla, Mary, Sarah, and our daughters) along with Rich. Maura, Fran and Judy led the adults, and I tagged along with Jim and Joe. We skied atop a hard, snow-packed road winding down the slopes of the Snowies for about two miles, our skis making disturbingly loud crunching noises, until we took a side

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trail through the deep woods where the fun began. Sometimes we whizzed almost too fast past a herd of mule deer, and then, when it got too steep, we all did the “slow plow,” occasionally falling into deep drifts of bluish-white snow and frequently, in an unorthodox way, grabbing branches to slow us down. One time I got stuck in such a heap of snow it took my wife and Judy all their efforts to pull me out. Joe did a belly flop at the bottom of one long hill to stand up at last with a pair of thick white eyebrows.

Fran shouted, “Enough already! Let’s stop and cook those hotdogs.” We found a suitable spot in the spruce woods to gather some dead branches and throw them into a snow pit and light a fire. Fran collected sticks for the frozen hotdogs and we all roasted one a piece to a nice blackness and place them into rolls only to discover that each hotdog had a frozen core of ice. But since we

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were all very hungry, there was not one of us that didn't wolf them down, ice crystals and all. But Fran made up for it by serving the adults hot coffee laced with brandy and the kids steaming hot chocolate. We doused our fire with a wall of snow and skied onward for another hour with tired and wobbly legs. At the lodge, four of us volunteered to drive back up and get our frozen, snow-laden cars that managed to start up after several turns of the ignition keys and drove back down to pick up our crew and drive in a caravan of cars across the rolling prairie, sometimes with fierce winds that created ground blizzards, back to our house by nightfall. Maura had earlier prepared chili in a crock pot that simmered all day long. We were more than ready for hot chili and fresh-baked cornbread after a hard day on the trail.

While all of my family had learned to cross country ski up in the Laramie Range doing the snow

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plow, squatting with poles dragging between our legs, making herringbone steps as well as the “step ladder” up steep hills, the kids and I learned alpine (down-hill) skiing at Medicine Bow Ski Area on “green” trails.” Christie Rose, a friend of Michelle’s, patiently taught us the plow and the J-stop and the technique of putting weight on the turning ski and so forth until we all got the hang of it. However, the kids, especially Rich, learned how to ski at least five times faster than I. He was fourteen and I was forty-five. As a result, he skillfully did moguls, while I had advanced only to blue trails. Michelle and Maureen often whizzed past their tortoise-like father.

Even though I never got past the intermediate stage, I grew to enjoy down-hilling. Maura, frightened of going too fast, refused to learn alpine skiing. What I liked most was to dance back and forth down a blue trail

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making turns with ease. But each time I tried a black trail I tensed up and skied over-cautiously. My three kids waited patiently for me to arrive at the bottom saying “It’s about time!” I would switch back to a blue trail to ski in comfort, not fear. I especially liked skiing in snow that fell from the heavens like confetti and covered all the spruce and fir trees making them look like glistening ghosts. All of us would meet at the ski lodge cafeteria for hot tea and a bowl of chili with crumbled crackers. We had no trouble sleeping that night.

III

Fishing

I grew up in New Jersey never learning how to fish. It wasn’t until I lived in Wyoming that Bob Campbell, a fellow faculty member, taught me how to tie on a fly, attach a bubble and spin cast for rainbow trout that I’d

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haul up on the shoreline. Once I became fairly adept at it, I fished with my university friends Bob Campbell and Jean-Louis Picherit. Both enjoyed lake fishing the most, and Bob most especially from a small boat just offshore. But I enjoyed stream fishing as much as lake fishing and one time went up to the Snowies solo to hike several miles across alpine terrain until I came across a narrow but gushing stream. I had to cast my line out only a short distance and ever so slowly reel in with hopes I would get some strikes. All of the sudden I felt a slight jerk on the line with a faint little tug. I reeled in very gingerly by keeping the line taught. I knew I had something with sudden jerks and quivers until I flipped a small spotted brook trout onto shore. I unhooked my “breakfast trout” and put it into my creel and repeated the process until I had five nice brookies that I cleaned and gutted along the shore. Awakening early the next day back in Laramie, I

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took the trout out of the refrigerator, lit up the cookout grill and roasted them over a charcoal fire brushing butter and fresh lemon juice onto each trout. Each of us had a peppered trout a piece for breakfast, French Canadian-style, along with toast and hash-brown potatoes and a tad of Tabasco sauce.

I was hooked on summertime fishing for the rest of our stay in old Wyoming. My neighbor down the street, Dave Smith, suggested we go backpacking into the Snowies all the way to Deep Lake on the north side of the mountain range perhaps four or five miles on a well-marked trail. In order not to have heavy packs, we decided not to bring tents but just sleeping bags to be placed around an evening campfire, cowboy style. Of course we needed to take our fishing gear including dry flies suitable for alpine lake fishing and some light cooking implements. We left mid-morning in Dave's

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truck to arrive at the North Gap Trailhead around noon. The “Gap” is a pass separating the Medicine Bow Peak Range from tundra-clad Brown’s Peak to the east. After munching on our sandwiches and guzzling cans of juice, we shouldered our packs and soon followed the shoreline of South Gap Lake from which rose sheer granite walls up to 11,900 feet. We could hear little, eroding rocks tumbling off the cliffs every so often as we gained elevation to about 11,000 feet at the Gap. From there we could see scores of lakes from tree-line on down to dense forests that stretched all the way to Elk Mountain.

We agreed to fish a few lakes before arriving at Deep Lake, several more miles down slope. We soon arrived at our first lake, Shelf Lake hugging the north side of Brown’s Peak. After casting a dozen or so times without even a nibble, we returned to North Gap Lake with its sheer cliff-sides as impressive as South Gap

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Lake. We spotted a cave perhaps five hundred feet above with a several bats fluttering out every few minutes in search of mosquitoes and other small bugs. On my first cast, instead of a little quivering tug, I was shocked by the force of a rainbow trout's strike. It struck so hard, my reel came loose and I lost the fish. Not having a screw driver to tighten the reel back onto the rod, I used the thin edge of a dime and proceeded with another cast with a new renegade fly tied on. Bam, another strike, and this time I reeled it up to the rocks only to have it flop off the hook and squirm its way back through cracks in the rocks into the lake.

“What’s going on over there,” Dave shouted from the opposite shore.

“Just lost two big ones!”

“Well, hell, that’s no way to fish! I have three nice rainbows in my creel anyway.”

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As the sun lowered in the sky, Dave suggested we move on to Deep Lake to set up camp. Reluctantly, I broke down my fishing rod, stuck it in the sleeve of my backpack, and we trudged along the trail losing elevation with each step until we entered a dense Engleman spruce and subalpine fir forest with a pleasant aroma of sap and needle like the north woods of Maine. Within two miles we arrived at the shoreline of the decent-sized Deep Lake. While Dave gathered firewood, I, not wanting to be skunked, cast out a line as far as I could and immediately got a strong strike, not like the one up at North Gap Lake, but strong nonetheless. I slowly reeled in what turned out to be a native cutthroat trout with a bright-red throat right under its opening and closing jaws. When I brought it over to the campfire, Dave looked at it and said, “You lucky dog! I’ll trade you my three rainbows for your one cutthroat trout!”

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We cleaned our four fish and roasted them over an open fire with thick, pointy sticks stuck through their bodies in the way Japanese people cook their Aiyu (trout-like fish) on Shikoku Island where we would stay several years later. Within twenty minutes we had a feast of tasty trout along with fire baked potato halves. Not a bad meal after all my difficulties up at North Gap Lake. It was great to sit around a fire and shoot the bull until we noticed a group of campers putting up their tents across the lake. They obviously felt the need for the cozy comfort of tents. Dave stared at them a while and mumbled, “Dag garn candy asses!” Unlike those guys across the lake, we enjoyed sleeping under the stars by the glow of embers with a roasted meal in our bellies.

The glare of the morning sun awakened us and up we sprung from our sleeping bags to put some sticks on the embers and soon had a blazing fire.

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“What should we have for breakfast—I forgot to bring anything except trail mix.”

Dave replied, “Let’s have some instant coffee and go fish for our breakfast.”

Fish we did and both of us caught a rainbow a piece to cook in the same manner as last night. Dave surprised me with two half-crushed breakfast rolls for a little something extra. Deep Lake certainly was a lake to remember.

IV

The Laramie Range

It is great to be out on the Laramie Plains on a crisp autumn day when you can see the entire Laramie Range stretching from the Colorado border all the way north to Laramie Peak. And to the south you can see the snow-covered mountains of the Rawah Range rolling up to the

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Wyoming border stretching northward from Cameron Pass in northern Colorado. During this season, my favorite place to drive across the Laramie Range is on the Rogers Canyon Road north of Laramie up to 8,500 feet and then down to 6,500 feet on the eastern side northwest of Cheyenne. As I drove past chokecherry bushes in Rogers Canyon, I remembered well the fine harvests of sour cherries good for making syrup, jam, and some Old West brandy. The road rises up to the spine of the Laramie Range with grassy fields and lone pine trees here and there. On more than one occasion, I have pulled the car off the road to climb up to these pine-crested knolls and look far north past Sybil Canyon to Laramie Peak. Once back on the road, I drove on over the top of the range to where the dirt road quickly drops down into winding, twisting canyons with bright orange aspen, red willow and yellowish cottonwood. Finally the road levels

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out into wide open prairie that spreads eastward all the way to Nebraska. The village of Horse Creek, Wyoming lies right at the eastern edge of the Laramie Range and is a great place to stop for a cup of coffee. Once, we had a summer faculty meeting just north of Horse Creek on the eastern edge of the Laramie Range. I still remember trying to go to sleep that night after our meetings with howling coyotes silhouetted by the moon. It is more relaxing to return to Laramie on this back road, leading to Rogers Canyon, rather than driving down to Cheyenne to pick up the interstate and speed along at 75 miles per hour. Back on the other side, I couldn't help but notice once again Laramie Peak way to the north in its perfect pyramid form. Mark Twain took note of this peak on his way to the Nevada Territory in the book *Roughing It* (1871). He describes this beautiful Wyoming mountain as being part of the old Black Hills, now restricted to

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South Dakota. My climb up Laramie Peak can be found in my other book, *Desert Rims to Mountains High* (2013). On the Wyoming side of the Black Hills looms Devils Tower, actually a volcanic plug exposed by millennia of erosion. It rises 1,200 feet above the surrounding terrain looking like a giant tree trunk. The Lakota people consider it to be just as sacred as the Black Hills in the neighboring state. They have spiritually reclaimed Devils Tower (granted to them in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie) by placing colored prayer flags on pine tree branches that surround the base of this giant rock formation. They do this because the Treaty of Fort Laramie has been broken numerous times; quite simply, once gold was discovered in the Black Hills the treaty meant little or nothing anymore.. Wouldn't it be nice as a gesture of peace for our government to at least return to the Lakota Nation the Black Elk Wilderness Area that

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encompasses sacred Harney Peak (*Hin Han Kaga Paha*)? From the Lakota perspective the real “value” of the Black Hills is in their spiritual power, not in yellow metal that drives the *wasichus* crazy (they who are many—Euro-Americans).

There are great hiking trails in a section of the Laramie Range called Pole Mountain and Blair Wallis just east of Laramie that afford the hiker with clear views of the Rawah Range and the Mummy Range in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. But my most memorable place in this Wyoming range is Vedauwoo sixteen miles east of Laramie just off Interstate 80. Like Sybil Canyon, Vedauwoo was and is a spiritually significant place to the Northern Arapaho people who now live on Wind River Indian Reservation in northern Wyoming. But their deep layer of spirituality underlies our modern times.

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We visited Vedauwoo dozens of times each year. In fact, the English Department had a fall cookout up there each September and the Newman Center held a yearly spring picnic. We have simply strolled along the walkways after a family picnic, or we took out-of-town guests up there to show them something unusual. These massive granite rocks rise into the sky perhaps one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet. They are made up of Sherman granite that dates back 1.8 billion years ago. A slightly younger pink version of granite 1.4 billion years old can be found interspersed here and there. They are a product of the force subducting plates. In little nooks and crannies within these rocks can be found a forest of south-facing ponderosa pines and north-facing lodgepole pines along with quaking aspen trees, Colorado blue spruce, Douglas fir trees and over two hundred sub-species of willow (rusty-red during the

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months of September and October). Vedauwoo rose ever upward some 8,000 feet above sea level during the Laramide Orogeny fifty to sixty million years ago. Since that period of time wind, rain, snow, and ice have eroded these rocks into strange goblin shapes covered with bright orange, green, yellow and black lichen.

The name *Vedauwoo* (pronounced Veedavoo) is an Arapaho word meaning “Earth-born Spirits.” This tribe, that once lived along the Front Range of Colorado and Wyoming (now restricted to the reservation outside of Lander), believe that Vedauwoo is a kind of spiritual vortex where everything has spirit and everything intercommunicates. Rocks talk to the sky, and ravens squawk to the rocks, while wild strawberries speak with bracken ferns and humans listen to roving moose who talk with the wind-blown pines. If you camp here overnight, you, too, can begin to listen to the needle-pine voice of the

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wind and enjoy the pure light of the stars and moon.

Our favorite pathway is the Turtle Rock Trail beneath the giant Turtle Rock so high above the other rock formations. Climbers are always scampering up fissures and cracks in this rock to the summit. My son Rich was one of those climbers; by the time he got into high school he joined the Laramie Senior High Rock Climbing Club to “do the turtle” many times as well as a rock formation called the Potato Chip which lurches out over sixty feet of empty space. Rich and friends free repelled the chip a number of times into thin air to dangle a while before pushing off the lower cliffs while holding firmly on the rope until they reached the bottom. Turtle Rock Trail skirts around the turtle and goes down into aspen groves and marshy grounds where moose love to feed on willows and water plants. This part of Vedauwoo reminds me very much of Yellowstone. The trail quickly

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emerges from the aspen forest up onto rocky flats that are dominated by pink Sherman granite, with one huge formation looking very much like a giant Egyptian pharaoh's head. The trail dips down again past blue spruce and Douglas fir and gradually turns to the north up over rocky ledges that provide a great spot to sit down and relax and perhaps compose trailside poetry in the form of an "amulet" which lends itself beautifully in portraying the inter-communication of earth-born spirits. Here is one that I extract from my journal composed while leading a Sierra Club hike:

*Yellow quaking aspen flow,
flow like waves of frozen fire,
fire that warms not the flesh,
not the flesh but the spirit,
the spirit of one in quest,*

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in quest of Wild Nature,

Wild Nature that rises within,

within the person revived by

yellow quaking aspen that flow.

The Turtle Rock Trail proceeds eastward along the back side of Vedauwoo and crosses a trickling stream that flows through aspen and willow groves. Within a mile or so, it comes around to the front side of this collection of lichen-covered rocks that resemble a giant artist's palette. At this point of the trail, we tend to linger, not wanting to return to the car. But, always, I know, there will be a nice crackling log fire and another one of Maura's great home-cooked meals that awaits us.

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IV

A New Perspective from the Rawah Range

The Rawah Range just stands there glaring to the south of the Laramie Plains looking much like an Icelandic landscape due northeast of Reykjavik with long flat rocky fields laced with wild grasses leading to, almost being drawn by, distant icy ridges where one can only imagine what mysteries they possess.

Rawah is an Arapaho word meaning “Wild Place,” and appropriately now has a U.S. Forest Service designation of “.Wilderness Area.” This country reflects a telling Arapaho linkage: from *Vedauwoo* you can see to *Rawah* and from the *Rawah* you can see to the *Ni-Chebe-chii*, and from the *Ni-Chebe-Chii* you can see down to the *Kawuneeche* Valley, that is—Earthborn Spirits to a Wild Place to the Never Summer Mountains to Coyote Valley. Saying this aloud, I felt as if I was reciting a Gary Snyder

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poem. Wyoming and Colorado certainly are places of linguistic layering that sometimes crop up like just like Vedauwoo. This kind of impact tugged at me until one spring day I had to go south across the border to see what's what, and maybe gain a different perspective of the Laramie Plains. It is from the Rawah Mountains that the Laramie River flows northward to Laramie and the Sybil Canyon and beyond Wheatland to join the Platte River at Fort Laramie. In late May (after the university graduation) when Maura was at work and the kids were still in school, I decided to take an overnight trip to this "Wild Place." I filled some plastic bags with dried apples, diced Swiss cheese, raisins, granola and instant coffee, and I threw a sleeping bag and one-burner camper stove into my car. I pulled out after having a hearty lunch and headed for the Cache la Poudre Canyon (named by French fur trappers who hid gun powder from the

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Indians) in northern Colorado, perhaps forty miles south of Laramie.

As I wound my way up the canyon with its dizzy heights high above and pine-studded slopes, two buck mule deer scampered from the forest down to a meadow at road level to pause and wait for traffic to pass. Wind whistled through ponderosa pine branches and tumbling torrents of Cache la Poudre River relaxed my entire being as I parked the car and whiffed the fragrant forest air. I looked across patches of needle-covered snow to see occasional snow buttercups that had begun to push their way through the snow despite the chill of frosty air. Ground squirrels and Clark's nutcrackers cackled in the shadow-filled woods, but I forced myself away from these peaceful woods and pushed on toward an even snowier Cameron Pass.

Chambers Lake looked awfully cold, dark, and icy for

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this time of year and seemed so distant in time and space from the warmer Wyoming prairies already abloom with fields of purple Pasque flowers. Nonetheless, I drove ever higher passing dense stands of Engleman spruce and subalpine fir. By now the patches of snow had grown to snowfields with creamy swirls around each tree. Had I come up here too early? I gathered a few fallen fir branches for a crude mattress and looked for a clear spot to unroll my sleeping bag under a now quite darkened sky flecked with stars and planets that touched the heights of Cameron Pass. I nibbled on some cheese and raisins while looking around this high and snowy terrain of northern Colorado where the Rawah Mountains loom skyward. Since I had no books or even a light to read them by, I crawled into my sleeping bag early in the evening so that I might have a full day to climb Clark Peak with its views northward. The rhythmic wind in the

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spruce lulled me off into a deep sleep.

In what seemed like minutes, I was awakened by my own chattering teeth. My God it was cold—too cold for springtime. I squinted at my watch to barely see that it was only 3:00 AM—too early for breakfast. I put on an extra sweater and tried to doze off, but the silence of the nighttime mountains was unnerving; I could hear my blood squeaking through veins and arteries. A crescent moon rose over some dark peaks, and I imagined that I could even hear the sound of the moon's slow rotation in the heavens. The sounds of silence are certainly an alluring paradox. I must have dozed off dreaming of a journey through space, for when I awoke the bloody red ball of sun gleamed into my half-shut eyes and Cameron Pass shimmered in pinks and purples. All of the northern Colorado Rockies rose before me with the jagged Nokku Crag, the Never Summers (Ni-Chebe-Chii), and the

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Rawahs sticking up in the sky as though I had awakened on Mars.

Steaming hot coffee and tasty granola snapped me out of my trance. I grabbed a bag of raisins, cheese and dried apples and climbed up out of the saddle of Cameron Pass toward Clark Peak with winding serpentine snowfields lacing its Appaloosa-slopes. Climbing up a steep, windswept coulee, I noticed very small matted patches of spruce trees looking like the forests of Iceland only knee-high. Small as these spruce trees are, their age could be well over one hundred years with miniature compressed tree rings telling the tale. Such tree-line patches afford comfortable shelters for porcupines or marmots. Mount Richtofen (named after Baron von Richtofen of World War I fame who came to Denver) of the Ni chebe-Chii rose high to the south, and my car far below looked like a frozen ant. I heard the

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plaintive notes of a white-crowned sparrow coming from the forests below. The pale-yellow sun felt good on my face as both the sun and I slowly climbed higher in the sky.

I had to stop to catch my breath and eat some snacks. I sat on a flat rock coated with green, orange and yellow like most of the rocks up here; lichens are an interesting symbiotic community of algae and fungi that slowly work on turning rock into soil. They must be quite hardy as they can survive winter temperatures of fifty to sixty below zero, not to mention winds over one hundred miles per hour. I climbed up to the rounded summit at an altitude of 12, 960 feet (the highest point of the Rawahs) to have a crystal clear view northward of the Laramie River Basin to where the ever-winding river enters the southern tip of the Laramie Plains. There was no snow up here—too windy—but only a fragile brown tundra

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awaiting its time to turn green. The land below, studded with small lakes, looked as primitive as any on our Earth planet.

Below me fell a twisting snowfield that dropped nearly to the foot of Cameron Pass. Remembering Edward Abbey's glorious snow-slide descent *Tukuknikivats* ("Where-the-Sun-Lingers") high above the sandstone arches of Utah, I decided to take my chances and slide down with my now empty backpack as a cushion. Abbey's descent of *Tukuknikivats* described in *Desert Solitaire* (there's a Thoreauvian book for you!) was much faster than mine. I simply slid down, without having to put on the breaks, at a leisurely seven or eight miles per hour, and watched the landscapes shift and change until they became inscapes of the mind. For about five or ten minutes—time seemed to melt then—I experienced the most relaxing, enjoyable free ride in my life. There I sat

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like some Hindu mystic with my arms folded moving downward through Rawah space as though on a magic carpet. If anyone had seen me, he would have thought I was, perhaps, a gliding alpine mirage of some old-time Arapaho Indian who had given up the ghost.

Curving down the last S-shaped coulee, I glanced down at a cow elk grazing on young alpine willow shrubs just a few hundred feet away. She did not even notice me at all, so silent was my snowy slide down. Unfolding my arms and shaking some powder snow off my backpack, I ambled down the last rocky slope toward my car. My mind was clear, my brain thinking, and my spirit was free. On the way back to Laramie, I hummed the old cowboy song “Whoppie-tie-yai-oh, git along little doggies, for ya know Wyoming is gonna be your new home!” It was good to cross the border into open green land.

CHAPTER FIVE

*The Indian Connection:
Wind River Indian Reservation and Beyond*

Part I

Rupert Weeks, Shoshone Storyteller

Rupert Weeks (1918-1983) was a mirthful Shoshone elder from Wind River Indian Reservation in upstate Wyoming. He had an infectious laugh-from high to very low pitch, and always ending in a raucous note. That's not to say he didn't get angry and sullen; he had those moods too. But he was truly an uncle to me, a teacher, and a friend. He was born in Garland, Utah in 1918 and attended a government industrial school there during the 1920's. Describing his experience there, he commented

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that the school rules were strict. If he was caught speaking Shoshone once, his hand was smacked with a ruler—twice and he was told to stand in a corner facing the wall like a dunce—thrice and he was denied a Christmas holiday with his parents. He remembered going to the Friday night silent movies and cheering for the U.S. Cavalry charging across the screen and booing at the “savages” who ruthlessly fired arrows at the brave soldiers. “Eeh gads,” Rupert once exclaimed, “I wasn’t so much brain-washed as I was white-washed.”

In 1933 he moved to the Eastern Shoshone Reservation in Wyoming where he remained (except for military service) until his death in September, 1983. Rupert fought in World War II during the Normandy Invasion and served under General Patton with the 80th Blue Ridge Division and as a cannoneer in the 319th Infantry from France to Belgium, Luxembourg, and

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southern Bavaria. He learned to speak German with daring fluency and met some good and friendly people in Germany and Austria who continued to correspond with him through the years. His chief responsibility was to speak in Shoshone with a fellow tribesman on the walkie-talkie to confuse Nazi soldiers about troop movement from France northward. We hear lots about the Navajo “Wind Talkers” in the Pacific Theatre but little or nothing about the Shoshone servicemen doing their job.

After the war Rupert took up painting his beloved Wind River Mountains and its wildlife; his paintings have a mystical air to them—some can be seen at the Museum of the Great Plains Indian Life in Browning Montana, and at the gallery of the tribal headquarters in Fort Washakie, Wyoming. He taught school at the Wyoming Indian School in Ethete and became an adept storyteller (in Shoshone and English) for which he was

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best known. I had the privilege of helping him see to press his story of a maturing Shoshone youth, *Pachee Goyo* (The Bald One) in 1981, his only book. Many a grand evening did my wife Maura and I have talking with him in our Laramie home over multiple cups of coffee. He liked to hear Maura talk about her living conditions in Ireland of the 1940's with no electricity or running water. The conversation proved the power of the past's persistence.

For several years during the 1970's he taught a class in Shoshone culture at the University of Wyoming where I first met him as a sit-in student. Previous to my meeting Rupert, the only Native American I had known was an old Ute Indian in Rocky Mountain National Park. Of course, I had known Indians described in books. Both the university students and school pupils greatly enjoyed his teaching because of his marvelous sense of humor

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characterized by a twinkle in his eye and a catching raucous laugh. But his seriousness of purpose in teaching language, custom, and folklore never failed to surface. *Pachee Goyo* poetically exhibits all of these qualities: young Pachee Goyo, for instance, must travel through dark woodlands where purple flowers shoot out beams of light in the evening sky, and he must fly on the back of a giant owl to return home after many moons of being lost and separated from his people.

It is one thing to sit in a classroom and listen to stories and facts about the mountain tribe of Shoshones, but it is quite another to leave the confines of the university and travel up to the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming and ramble about with Rupert as your guide. He invited me to his “abode” for the first time in 1974. I have since journeyed up there a dozen times, sometimes alone, sometimes with family, or sometimes with as

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many as twenty-five students. My respect for this man grew steadily through the years. He was closer to me than any uncles of mine. Willa Cather's personage Gaston Cleric in *My Antonia* discusses the Virgilian notion of patria as "not a nation or even a province, but the little neighborhood with...fields sloping down the river and to old beech trees with broken tops." Rupert had such a concept of patria; his, being the beloved "*Udadai*" (Warm Valley) nestled beneath the dark slopes of the Wind River Mountains laced with distant seemingly floating snowfields and glaciers. He had visited his relatives at the Western Shoshone Reservation at Fort Hall, Idaho, but it did not compare with the beauty of his eastern reservation.

Late August 1974 had come, and I left Laramie at sunrise for the reservation. Cobblestone clouds cast circular shadows on the rolling prairies. Farther north,

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beyond Rawlins, half moon crescents of white rock at the base of the Ferris Mountains gleamed in the mid-morning sun to form a perfect Charlie Russell painting. The Ferris Range looked as if you could reach out and touch it. Everything effused with mysticism, and I was in a perfect mood for my first visit to Wyoming's Indian Lands beyond Lander. The Wind River Mountains are Wyoming's highest with Gannett Peak (first climbed by Captain John C. Fremont in 1842) just shy of 14,000 feet. They dominate the entire reservation; even if one is in the lowest of cottonwood hollows, he cannot help but look up "unto the mountains." As I pulled up to Rupert's modest home amid cottonwood trees beside a little stream, it did not take long to sense my Indian friend's love for his land; Virgil himself couldn't have loved his patria any more.

"What ya think of this country?" he asked.

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“Beautiful. It’s so clear you can see a thousand miles.”

“And then some,” he chuckled.

After a tasty lunch of Shoshone fry bread, chokecherry gravy, and elk stew, we drove out of his homestead toward Washakie Park just below the rugged Saint Lawrence Basin.

“See yonder ridge? About a hundred years ago some Shoshone Indians saw antelope up there. But one didn’t look right. He acted funny. After a closer look they saw it was a Blackeet Indian (their ancient enemy) hunting antelope dressed up like one. They gave him chase on *Shoshone* hunting grounds, and, see that rock over there? That’s where he was killed. They must have had damn fine eyesight in those days,” he said with a chuckle.

When we reached the base of rugged canyon

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country, he pointed out an old wagon trail made seventy-five years earlier for getting firewood. And beyond that rose a burial mound with the remains of some of his ancestors. In fact, somewhere (he wouldn't say just where, of course) was the remains of Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, son of *Sacajawea* (whose name in Shoshone means one who throws the boat ashore). His mother had given him the gold medal she received from Captains Lewis and Clark as a token of appreciation for her help in guiding them through the Rocky Mountains on the way to the Columbia River and the Pacific Northwest. Jean-Baptiste was buried with that medal bearing the image of President Jefferson along with his strangled horse so that he would have it to ride into the afterworld.

“How do you view Sacajawea,” Rupert asked, “as a heroine or a traitor? We see her as a traitor. White men

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like you wouldn't be standing here if it hadn't been for her," he said pausing in silence and then letting out a loud raucous laugh.

"That medal of hers," he said, "she used it for barter—but not barter in the usual way. If she needed supplies, she'd say to the storekeeper, I don't have any money, but you can have President Jefferson's medal. The storekeeper would say that he wouldn't dare take a thing so precious and he let her have her flour and spuds."

Not since Ireland had I experienced a land so steeped in legend and tradition. Driving above rattlesnake country into pine forests, we stopped to feast on wild gooseberries tart and refreshing. The chokecherries were still green, but, once ripened, they would be picked for another year's supply of chokecherry gravy (made by adding flour to chokecherry syrup). Rupert and his

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Shoshone people are the ones who inspired us to pick chokecherries in Rogers Canyon to make pancake syrup.

“Now this road gets a bit steep. You think your car will make it?...she seems to be doing okay,” he mused. Rocks and stones flew out of the back of my spinning tires and the car lurched up a sixty-degree slope of an old CCC road winding in and out of switchbacks.

“See that truck in the bushes over there? It was going for firewood when its brakes gave way.” He looked hard at me to see my reaction. I tried not to show fear.

I breathed easily once we arrived at a level surface where a cool wind blew steadily in our faces after we got out of the overheated, exhausted car; we then walked out into peaceful Washakie Park (at 8,000 feet) just below much higher, jagged mountains. As we sauntered to the other end of this valley, Rupert’s eyes gleamed with

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pride once he knew I took to his country.

“You know the legend about Chief Washakie killing a Crow Chief out yonder at Crowheart Butte and eating his heart? That’s not a historical legend at all. It’s a Wyoming Hysterical Society Legend. Some old Indian really pulled the leg of a white historian. The butte is a tough thing to climb let alone have a fight on top of it. And we Shoshone people were never really enemies with the Crows—we intermarried you know. Another thing—that butte in Shoshone is called *Hi ham be*—Raven Butte, not crow (meaning Crow Indian). No Indian should climb it, or bad things will happen to his relations and still to this day you can hear frightened raven and crow cries at nighttime near Raven Butte. Now Chief Washakie knew the difference between a raven and a Crow Indian! But why the Crow people haven’t denied the legend I don’t know; unless Chief Washakie did eat a Crow chief’s

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heart.” Again came a raucous laugh.

He pointed out in the far distance the Owl Creek Mountains, and said his people never go back there. Bad things happen there—bad spirits. No, if you go back in there, you never come out the same person. Rupert remained silent for quite some time. Had he known someone that had something bad happen to him in those dark mountains? A.B. Guthrie’s characterization (in his novel *The Big Sky*) of a crazy tumble of Montana hills (not too far north of the Owl Creek Mountains) with “tales of strange doings” hit home. All over Wyoming and Montana are tales of “strange doings.” I remembered a story written by Ambrose Bierce called “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” about a man being hanged to death, but his mind flies backward in time to past events in his life. For a while the reader is fooled into thinking he got away somehow until his neck cracks at the end of

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the story. Then I heard Rupert say once again “bad things happen back there.” To break the silence, I asked him about the Bighorn Mountains and the famed medicine wheel and whether or not the Shoshone people had anything to do with it. He said “heck yeah” to me-- his tribe used this medicine wheel as a time calendar when it once had a cottonwood trunk placed at the center of this circle of stones so that its shadow would be crossed by the rising moon and setting sun at a very sharp angle during the autumnal equinox. When this happened, our old-time shamans would warn hunters to gather their stashes of bighorn sheep meat and get back down to the valleys below because winter’s bitter cold would soon be here. Rupert added that there are many medicine wheels from central Montana down to northern Wyoming. Hunters could send smoke signals from one to another about the location of bison herds in the valleys below.

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The “medicine” of the medicine wheel is that it served as important message center as well as a time calendar.

“You should go up there some day to see it on the equinox.”

“Will do,” said I.

Following Rupert’s advice, my friend Victor Flach (of the university art department) and I visited this site a year later during the autumnal equinox on September 22nd. We had read that this ancient medicine wheel is about 350 to 400 years old and is made of rocks and stones in the form of an outer circle about forty feet in diameter and has a much smaller circle that surrounded the long-gone cottonwood pole. Within the large circle are twenty-eight spokes going from the outer rim of the circle into the edge of the inner circle’s rim. These twenty-eight spokes represent the twenty-eight days of the lunar month. The whole circle lies at a twenty-degree angle at 10,000 feet

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in the Bighorn Mountains. The day was crystal clear; we could see across the Bighorn Basin all the way to Rupert's Wind River Mountains. Clouds lingered on the horizon as the sun began to set. Then, an amazing thing happened just as Rupert had described--the moon rose to the east as the sun set to the west, and they both formed a perfect right angle across the center of the medicine wheel. That angle truly marks the beginning of the fall season. The ancient shaman could then give warning to the hunters.

Rupert and I walked back to the car past looming white cliffs looking like giant chief heads and eased the car ever so slowly down that winding snake of a road, down to snake country. Rupert guessed my thoughts and brought up the topic of rattlers. He said on certain full moons, he had witnessed a couple dozen of them reared up out of their coils with their heads held high in the sky.

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He said it was an eery sight. Almost back in “Udadai,” my friend pointed out a round sandstone cliff full of petroglyphs on its far side. He seemed perplexed as to how his ancestors could have created them so high up the sides of sheer cliffs.

“Next time you come, we’ll go have a look.”

“You betcha,” I said.

Four of the shortest hours in my life had sprinted past me on that day I visited Rupert. The mountain tribe of Shoshone people may have their troubles in an age which has only begun to appreciate their life style, but they have a vital contact with a power no man can deny, the LAND, a spiritual land created by *Duma Upa* that is alive as any living creature.

Later that fall Greg Bean, a graduate student of mine, and I went up to see Rupert. He knew what we came for—the petroglyphs, but he didn’t call them that—

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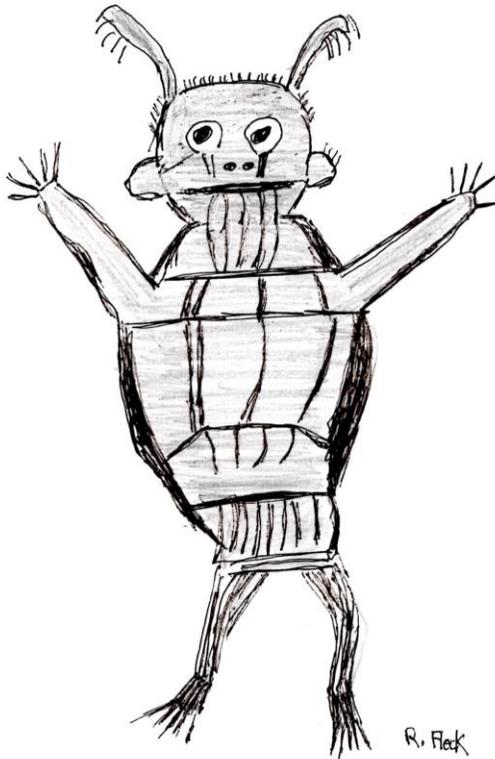
he preferred “spirit drawings.” He was as anxious to see them himself as he hadn’t hiked back in there in years. After hopping out of the car far above a roaring stream tumbling out of the Wind River Mountains, we began our hike over several miles of sagebrush terrain with numerous yucca plants sticking up between the rocks here and there. Rupert told us to be on our guard for rattlers, especially hidden in sagebrush, but we didn’t see any that entire afternoon. I remember once when I was a graduate student at Colorado State University, I brought along a volume of John Steinbeck out on the prairie to read. It became too hot to wear my Peruvian-style jacket, so I tossed it aside. Out of the corner of my eye, as I sat there reading, I saw a black and yellow rattler slithering up to my jacket where he coiled himself with his triangular head pointed right at me. The only way I could recover my jacket, not having any weapons, was to throw

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dust in his lidless eyes until he slithered away. I didn't remember much of what I read of my Steinbeck that day except that the story was set in the rugged San Gabriel Mountains of California where there are lots of rattlers. Approaching the edge of a high sandstone cliff, Rupert, Greg and I angled down along a narrow trail imprinted on bright orange sand. By sundown we had made it to the most impressive wall of "rock art" I had seen. Countless hundreds of figures had been carved into the sandstone; some looked like Van Daniken's creatures from outer space; others looked like animals and humanoids. We sensed a sacred aura in this area high above the Little Wind River. It bordered on being eery. The spirit drawings looked like nothing I had seen before in that they combined human forms with animal forms with non-terrestrial forms. Even though the sun had set and it had become fairly dark, a sliver of moon was enough to

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illuminate these drawings to make it seem as though they were really alive. It's too bad Edgar Allan Poe didn't get to see these spirit drawings—who knows what kind of stories he would have written?



A Sketch of a highly unusual petroglyph (spirit drawing) at Wind River Indian Reservation along the Little Wind River.

As the sun set, Greg asked Rupert if he would care to

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share his thoughts with us. He remained silent several moments before speaking. His voice seemed distant as though he was in some other sphere; he explained that all these spirit drawings on the cliff were not made by humans because they evolve and change as the months go by. He said that one figure in particular used to have four fingers on each hand and now had five. He paused again for several moments. I had never seen him so deeply reflective.

“If you want to seek medicine,” he said, “you must fast for three days—no water and no food. Then you come here at the base of this spirit-drawing cliff above the Little Wind River. Come just about this time of day wearing only a loin cloth. When you sit down with crossed legs, you will hear distant voices—actually they’re right here. It’s like hearing croaking and piping frogs very nearby and sheep or cattle bellowing in the

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distance. Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which especially when everything else is so silent." Greg and I felt a bit apprehensive, but we remained quiet as Rupert continued:

"The sun will go down and the voices will continue to haunt you, and speak to you. You will understand what they're saying. Hear that coyote? He's saying something right now...when you lose consciousness, the whole under-earth will be seen. You'll see red, green, blue and yellow veins (as though the earth had flesh) leading up to plant roots. Each of those colors is power—power to overcome disease, illness, even mental illness and paranoia. Take note of the plants that a particular color leads to. With that plant you will have good medicine. But, he interjected forcefully, if you come here for a lark, thinking it's all a big joke, the joke will be on you—you'll wake up tumbled down the river;

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if you come with a sincere purpose, you'll wake up at sunrise (seemingly only minutes after sunset) with a shiny feather in your lap. That feather is what will tell you *Duma Upa* (the Great Spirit) has spoken with you. Some have come here with a sincere heart but have later misused that power for money and prestige...you know why we Shoshone people now don't live too long? All of us are dying, it seems, in our late sixties or earlier. Some of us have misused that power."

I asked Rupert how they have misused it, and he explained that they simply used it for their own personal benefit, not for the good of all the people. Greg suddenly lurched with fright in his eyes. He pointed to a frog skin at the very base of a frog-creature carved in sandstone. We two non-Indians (actually Greg is part Indian) felt a bit uneasy and asked if we could leave as it was getting dark and we might not find our way back.

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As we three hoofed over the open terrain toward the car under a brilliant array of stars slightly illuminating the snowy crags of the Wind River Mountains, I asked Rupert if he felt that yonder mountains were sacred.

“You know that on evenings such as this, little lights rise and fall over those mountains. Some people think they’re UFO’s, but they’re wrong. They are the spirits of my ancestors; they’re speaking to me telling me of things to come like a great wind that will last one year and be strong enough to blow down buildings. Even the western meadowlark, who has added an extra note to his song, tells me that. Something is in the air.”

We arrived at our car and slowly proceeded down a bouncy, bumpy road until we reached his comfortable little mountain home with smoke curling out of its chimney up to the stars. As I crawled into my sleeping

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bag that night, I reflected how incorrect some writers are who, like Edward Abbey (in *Beyond the Wall*), assert that petroglyphs mean little or nothing to the modern day pickup truck-Indian. I had the feeling that Rupert gave us just the tip of the iceberg that evening down in the sandstone hollow. How much our streets, buildings, asphalt, and dead concrete pavements have hardened our spirits to a living planet which throbs with un-deciphered meaning. Were the Greeks right about the “music of the spheres”? I’d like to think so. Our planet and all the others are *alive*, each emitting its own magnetic sound wave (music).

About a year later Rupert invited my entire Native American literature class up to the reservation. We met Rupert by the tribal complex (that now has a Rupert Weeks Memorial Room) in Fort Washakie where he began to teach and guide my class. We went to the

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“Soldiers’ Graveyard” where Chief Washakie lies buried. “See over yonder? Look at the wise chief’s grave,” Rupert said a bit sarcastically. “You know, Washakie was only a camp-moving chief when our tribe held council with the white generals as to what land we should live on. Chief Gray Hunchback was our leader, and he did most of the talking and drove hard bargains. Washakie sat in the back row as he was only a camp-moving chief. But the generals spotted him and because he seemed friendlier, they pronounced him chief of all the Wind River Mountain Shoshones. He naturally cooperated fully with any land compromise that had to be made, especially concerning the hot springs of Thermopolis that Chief Washakie gave over to the generals for a nice juicy can of peaches.” Rupert chuckled to himself and said, “That’s why they called him a great and wise chief. Of course I’m giving you a

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totally different side of Wyoming history. I hope it doesn't shock you too much, ” and then came that raucous laugh.

“When did all this happen?” one of the students asked.

“Way back in 1868,” Rupert responded

“Can't the Shoshone tribe bring a case against the government,” the student asked.

If they did, we might get back our can of peaches for recompense,” answered Rupert with a chuckle.

Those rugged Wind Rivers rose up high in the distance coated with big white snowfields glared in the strong autumnal sun. Crickets hummed around us emphasizing our thoughtful silence as we trekked out of the graveyard single file. An African-American girl from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania asked Rupert why he kept an eagle feather in his pickup truck. All he said, with a

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characteristic twinkle in his eye, was that it was a great deal more than an eagle feather.

A half hour later, we stood along the shores of Bull Lake north of Fort Washakie. From here we could see far into the high country of the Wind Rivers mirrored on the surface of the calm lake. Chokecherry bushes and sagebrush lined the shore below us as we chose boulders to sit on to listen to Rupert tell stories and mythic tales of his people. As he lit a cigarette, he began to tell us the legend of Bull Lake:

In ancient times two warriors came to hunt and fish and rode horseback past many pools and small lakes. One started to fish while the other gathered firewood. At dark they saw some bison and so their got out their bow and arrows and shot one, but they made a mistake by giving *no thanks* to Duma Upa. One warrior got so hungry he started eating raw meat with blood running

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down his chin. The other said that they should cook the meat first, but the hungry one kept eating and eating. That night he didn't feel too good and sensed strange feeling in his feet. Hooves began to form down below, and then fur started growing up his legs and chest. By the morning's light he had turned into a big bison with tears in his eyes. He told his human friend not to worry, but to go home to the village and tell the people what happened. Meanwhile he roared like the sound of ice breaking up—wush whooh! Rupert clapped his hands and let out another whoop. And to this day you can still hear the sound of that bull bison roaring, especially when the ice cracks and booms on Bull Lake. Rupert smiled and took a puff on his cigarette.

He then told us the story of his great uncle and other hunters who went all the way across into eastern Utah to hunt for *wapiti* (elk). While in Utah they heard

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about Wovoka and the great ghost dance vision that he had and news of it would eventually spread eastward to the Shoshone and Arapaho and even to the Lakota. They had success hunting and made pony drags to carry a good bit of wapiti and even antelope meat back to their people. But a blizzard made them go the wrong way back to the Warm Valley, and after it had cleared, it became bitter cold with a fierce wind. They decided to perform a ghost dance holding hands in a circle. After a few minutes of singing, they felt their feet lift off the ground for a short while. Soon they all fell asleep, but when they woke up, they realized that they were on the right way home and ten miles closer than when they had gone to sleep.

“What was Wovoka’s vision?” a student asked.

“When he performed a ghost dance with eleven others he saw a new plane of earth slide over the present one causing the earth to look like it did before the coming

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of white men. Eventually the ghost dance was outlawed by the government. When the defiant Lakota people gathered to perform the ghost dance at Wounded Knee, it was crushed with gatling guns fired at men, women and children back in 1890. I'm sure you can guess the reason why the government outlawed the ghost dance."

"Maybe it gave the Indian people reason for hope," said one of my students, and Rupert nodded his head with a twinkle in his eye.

As we slowly paced along the shoreline of Bull Lake, I asked Rupert to tell the story of how he got his last name of "Weeks."

"Ha, let me tell you. In the old days when we 'savages' were being enrolled by army agents on this reservation, two brothers (my great uncles) stood in line. 'What's yer name,' a soldier asked one of them. 'Wayaks,' he said. 'Okay, let's make it Weeks.' 'You,'

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another soldier said to the other brother, ‘What’s yer name?’” Tho-ap, ‘Thorpe will be your name.’ As a result, two brothers were given two different last names. Now I ask you, who’s the ‘savage’?” Rupert, dragging on a cigarette, asked my class if they knew the Indian definition of Columbus Day. He said it’s the day white man was first discovered. With the sun lowering over the Wind River Mountains, we bade farewell to our Indian guide. I can still see him standing there smoking a cigarette and waving good-bye.

A few years later Rupert invited some graduate students and me to attend (as silent observers with no cameras or notebooks) the great Shoshone Sundance. They had very kindly set up two tipis for us perhaps a hundred yards away from the ceremonial dance site. It was a fiercely hot July afternoon when we arrived, our minds in a daze. After a meal of corn dogs and beans, we

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ambled over to the ceremonial site to watch the intricate construction of the Sundance Lodge around a sacredly selected cottonwood tree marked with dried willow branches lashed half way up the trunk.

While the Indians worked at construction, I couldn't help noticing those white Wind River Mountains which contrasted so sharply with dark lower canyons. Twelve forked pine logs (representing the twelve moons of the year) were planted deep and in an upright position circling around the cottonwood tree or "tree of life" as it is called. Each year the medicine man selects a particular cottonwood tree for the Sun Dance. The lodge is then built around that special tree, not like the Lakota who select a cottonwood tree, chop it down and drag it to the same ceremonial location through the years to be planted right in the center. Here in the Wind Rivers, the Shoshones place large pine branches right in the fork of

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the planted pine logs and then into the crotch of the central cottonwood tree. They then weave willow branches between each of the twelve pine branches to form a circular roof. They place leafed cottonwood branches all around the outer circle to enclose the lodge, except for an eastward entrance. I noticed that a buffalo skull had been set up on the cottonwood trunk facing west. This year's structure was completed by dusk; it simply looked beautiful—a living circle of vegetation.

Around midnight the medicine man (I thought it just might be Rupert with a painted face) appeared leading his sun dancers slowly to the beat of drums sounding like a steam locomotive. They proceeded around the lodge twice before entering and after doing so sat in a semi-circle facing east all night to be ready to greet the rising sun with eaglebone whistles. As they sat there an amazing thing happened up in the starlit sky. A

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silver cloud formed in the exact shape of a charging bison (*bozheena*) as if to be in spiritual commensuration. It was difficult to sleep that night; we were all too anxious for the rising sun. I thought of Rupert, my friend through the years. I remembered his tragic loss of his daughter Violet and the “give-away” he had in her honor. He and his wife had gathered all their belongings and placed them within a circle. He cashed in his modest bank account and placed dollar bills in a pile on the table. Once the give-away dance had been performed, the saddest I have ever witnessed, all of his relatives were given dressers, towels, bedding, or even cash, and then were given a feast in remembrance of his daughter. Of what value are couches, chairs, furniture, when you have lost a loved one? It is Shoshone philosophy to begin anew, however difficult that may be. But Rupert, as sad as he was, had a tremendous resilience of spirit, and it

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was that spirit of his that got him through ugly boarding school years, the Normandy Invasion, and the tragic loss of his daughter...And what of the Sundance? As he explained to me, a Sundance is a revival dance. Participants sacrifice their energies, their time, their sweat, and their spirits (in the old days, their blood) for the benefit of the whole tribe, of the human race itself. I remember one time, again with my students, sitting in a Lakota Sweat Lodge (Purification Lodge) in a clockwise circle around the steaming-hot stones and the medicine man crying, “*Mikoshala*—all my relatives.” The medicine man explained to us “all my relatives” doesn’t just mean aunts and uncles, but all humanity, whether Native Americans, Euro-Americans, Australian Bushmen, or Koreans—everybody.

Here in Wind Rivers, the Shoshones would be dancing in relief teams for three days without food and

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only sipping water at night. They, too, danced for their “Mikoshala,” the whole human race. Yet, back in the nineteenth century, our government outlawed this ceremonial dance as being ‘savage and primitive.’ We all knew back then that each individual should be out for himself and to hell with the “Mikoshala.” The collective, communal sense of the Indian Nations was something to be banished in favor of a more individualized society. Even to this day some politicians are in favor of “termination,” or the break up of reservations. But the Sun Dance has come back strong and no police or armies are sent to break it up.

The Wind River Mountains had the faintest tinge of pink as we rolled out of our sleeping bags. Amazingly, we could see our breath it was so chilly, and yet by noon it would be in the upper eighties. A few quick swills of hot coffee and some bites of Shoshone fry bread

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(provided by our hosts), and we left our tipis to race over to the sun lodge. One of my graduate students, a tall blond-bearded fellow, saw a shorter line of people on the other side of the east entrance and crossed over it. As he did so, he realized his serious mistake of casting his shadow made by the rising sun into the sun lodge itself. He smacked himself on his forehead mumbling to himself, “Whitey does it again!” The Shoshone people simply chuckled with no offense taken. Then the semi-circle of seated dancers all blew on their piercing eaglebone whistles to greet the rising sun. The sound of these penetrating whistles remains part of my spirit.

The first small group of dancers began, constantly blowing their eaglebone whistles as they moved back and forth toward (but never touching) the sacred cottonwood at the earthen center. The cottonwood, with its star-shaped cambium layer and its prayer-sounding rustling

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leaves, is indeed a sacred tree; all living things should and must be considered as such. Who made them?

Only after teams of dancers had danced for three exhausting days and nights, could they dare touch the tree of life. It was then that it was finished, and its life, the dancer's life, became ours. Duma Upa would grant his blessings which, though they may not been seen, will be felt inside not only by the dancers but by the recipients of this sacrifice. As we drove back to Laramie after having thanked our faithful Shoshone friends, we continued to hear those eaglebone whistles and see those dancers dancing to touch life's own tree. In September, 1983 Rupert's tree of life ended and so did a branch of my own tree. In memory of his spirit, I write this poem:

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Homage to a Shoshone Elder

*His body lay in special tipi
full of flowers as friends intone
songs of the Sundance as he wished,
and slow cortege proceeds past fields
where horses gallop following that hearse
as if to get one last look.*

*As his body is lowered down into sunny grave
I think of him and his joyous days of storytelling beaming
sunshine to weary souls so much in need of Shoshone
light.*

II

Time with the Arapaho and Lakota

Pius, Moss, another Native American, came to the University of Wyoming to teach a special class on language and culture of his people, the Arapaho. Pius Moss was a tribal educator of the Arapaho tribe on the Wind River Reservation, the east side of U.S. 287, known jokingly as the Mason-Dixon Line that separates Shoshones from Arapahos. Pius, who stood over six feet four, and his seven-foot tall son came to my class one

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day, both wearing black cowboy hats with eagle feathers in their hat bands. My students perked up when these two giants entered the room. Since Pius taught Arapaho kids language and culture at Saint Stephen's Mission School on the reservation, he decided to give us an example of how he taught school kids their culture. He had given them an assignment on how many uses they could find that the old-time Arapaho Indians made of the bison (*hoowonookee*) that the Arapaho considered to be a gift from *Chebbeniathan* (the Great Spirit). All the kids came back with a list of about a dozen or so uses from meat to fur and hide to cover tipis. But one little girl didn't have any! Pius asked her why not. "Well, my grandpa is coming tomorrow and is it alright if I ask him?" Pius said okay, but you have to turn in your assignment for our next class.

When the class met again, she had nothing, and

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Pius asked her what went wrong. Is the assignment to difficult for you? She explained that her great uncle was coming the following weekend and she wanted to ask him as well. Pius excused her for another class period. But when she returned to class the next week she had nothing. Again she explained that her great grandma was coming the next day and couldn't she ask her too? "Okay," said Pius, "just this one last time, you understand?" Finally the girl came in with a list of Arapaho uses of the bison—nearly one hundred-fifty of them, including the tail for a fly swatter, the carved-down hip bone for a soup ladle, the hooves for drum-like instruments, the skull for the Sundance, the inner dried and stiffened hide for a warrior's arrow shield, and scores more.* Pius gave her a tardy grade that he reduced to a straight A instead of an A+. As the two gentle giants left our classroom, my students remained speechless. Pius

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had not only taught them cultural ways of his people, but also their sense of what we call today “ecology.”

On another occasion the Arapaho Tribal Council invited Wyoming college professors and high school teachers to come up to the reservation at Ethete, Wyoming for a cultural sharing event. One of our English Department members was into hallucinogenic mushrooms and quite naturally asked, in a nervous and raspy voice, a tribal elder up on the stage whether or not the Arapaho people had interest in mushrooms. The entire panel of Arapaho elders and Indian people in the audience roared with laughter. The blond, blue-eyed professor didn't understand why until they explained that the word for mushroom (*boh'oonibee*) in Arapaho was “thunder shit.” That ended the red-faced professor's questions. They did explain uses they made of other plants in Nature, such as the sweet inner bark of young

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willow shoots for candy and the oil from heart-leaved arnica for rheumatism.

Then it came time for storytelling. Ralph Grasshopper, the official tribal storyteller gave us the story of an unusual race. It went like this:

“One time a wood tick challenged a coyote to a three-mile race.

The amazed coyote said to the tick he must be crazy, but let’s do it! At the start line, an old chief clapped two bison hooves together, and the tick jumped onto the coyote’s rear left foot as the race started.

The coyote burst into full speed as the tick crawled up the coyote’s leg. The coyote ran harder and faster around the bend, looking back to make sure the tick was way behind, but as the coyote ran through a pine forest, the tick crawled along the coyote’s back. The coyote, panting, leaped across a stream and ran up a steep hill

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while the tick crawled up the coyote's head, and as the coyote approached the finish line, the tick got to the tip of the coyote's black nose and just as the sly coyote was about to cross the line, the tick jumped off his nose to land six inches ahead of the coyote, and it looked up from the ground and said, "*You Slow!*"

The third tribe I encountered and took my students to visit as before mentioned was the Lakota of Pine Ridge, South Dakota, Nicholas Black Elk's people. But before going to Pine Ridge, let me relate a fascinating encounter I had with a Lakota-cowboy in the San Francisco Greyhound Bus Depot. A sort of rough-looking guy with long jet-black hair sat next to me in the waiting room, and he asked me where I was headed. I said Seattle for the last week or so of my sabbatical leave. He said, "So you're a professor. What do you teach? I told him Native American literature. He asked if

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I did anything with the Lakota because he was himself Lakota. “Sure,” I said. Before taking my class up to Pine Ridge to hear Calvin Jumping Bull tell *Iktomi* (trickster spider) stories, I had them read *Black Elk Speaks* and write a paper on it.”

“I know Calvin, who else do you know,” he asked.

“Everett Catches and Hildegard Catches.”

“Sure, I know them too.”

I asked him, “What are you doing out here in San Francisco?”

“Headed for Salinas and looking for ranch work.”

“You’re sure a long ways from home!”

“Well, you know, I am sort of living out the old tradition even though we’re in the 1980’s. We Lakota hunters wandered far lookin’ for sacred buffalo (sacred because the buffalo or bison was a gift of the Great Spirit, and it had twenty-eight ribs, one for each day of

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the lunar month). . We were always on the move, just like the buffalo.”

My bus for Seattle was announced over the PA, and as I got up to leave, I wished him well and hoped he that he would get himself a good job. He gave me the Lakota hand signal for goodbye by quickly moving his hand from the waist with the palm outward.

When I took my students in university vans up to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, we had the good fortune of having Everett Catches (grandson of Chief Sitting Bull) teach us about the tradition of the *Uweepi* or Sweat Lodge which is a necessary rite before the great collective ceremonial rite of the Sun Dance as well as the individual rite of the Vision Quest or *Hamblechya*. One of my non-Indian graduate students, after being introduced to *Uweepi*, asked permission to go on *Hamblechya* a few weeks later. Both Everett and his wife

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Hildegard served their people as a medicine man and medicine woman as and our teachers for the day. He looked hard at my student and sensed his sincerity and told him to return in July and he would serve as his spiritual guide. My student, Ian Gersten, was a former University of Wyoming football player and remained in great shape. He gladly went back up to Pine Ridge in the blazing heat of early July. After the Uweepi ceremony, he was told not to drink any water or have any food until he experienced a truly significant vision. Ian went to the top of a high mesa in the Black Hills (*Paha Sapa Wakan*) and did very well on the first day and looked forward to his quest on the next day when maybe he would experience a vision. But, *none* came, and how thirsty and hungry he had become. On the third day his non-intuitive, western mind told him that he was dying and that if he didn't drink any water, his dead body would be

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carried away inside a “buffalo robe.” This western mindset of logic and reasoning destroyed all his chances for receiving a vision, and he returned, shame-faced, to Everett, his medicine man who chastised him for not having faith enough to overcome western mindset of “logic” and “rational thinking.” Ian wrote a brilliant masters thesis in American Studies on the details of his experience that so vividly depicted a rather tragic cultural conflict between East and West.

It seems to me that one of the richest memories of my years in Wyoming was “the Indian connection.” Without it, the prairies, the mountains, the great vistas of western landscapes dotted with prancing antelope and cottonwood-lined streams would have been a bit too sterile.

* Here is the little girl’s list of Arapaho uses of the sacred *Hoowonookee* (bison), courtesy of the St. Stephens

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Mission School at St. Stephens, Wyoming:



《GIFT OF THE GREAT SPIRIT》

Aprapaho Uses of the Sacred Buffalo or Bison:

Rawhide:

Containers
Shields
Buckets
Moccasin soles
Drums
Splints
Mortars
Cinches
Ropes
Sheaths
Saddles
Saddle blankets
Stirrups
Bull boats
Masks
Parfleche
Ornaments
Lariats
Straps
Caps
Quirts
Snowshoes
Shrouds

Horns:

Arrow points
Cups
Fire Carrier
Powderhorn
Spoons
Laddles
Headdresses
Signals
Toys
Medication

Buckskin:

Cradles
Moccasin tops
Winter Robes
Bedding
Shirts
Belts
Leggings
Dresses
Bags
Quivers
Tipi Covers

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Skull:	Tipi Liners
	Bridles
Sun Dance	Backrests
Medicine Prayers	Tapestries
Ceremonies	Sweatlodge Covers
	Dolls
	Mittens
Brain:	Meat:
Ornamentations	Immediate Use
Food	Sausages
	Cached Meat
Beard:	Jerky (dehydrated)
	Pemmican
Ornamentations	
Teeth:	
Ornamentations	Muscles:
Tongue:	Glue
	Bows
Choice Meat	Thread
Comb (rough side)	Arrow-Ties
	Cinches
Blood:	
Soups	Hair:
Puddings	

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Paints

Bladder:

Pouches

Medicine Bags

Tendons:

Sinews-Sewing

Bowstrings

Fat:

Tallow

Soaps

Hair Grease

Cosmetic Aids

Tail:

Medicine Switch

Fly Brush

Decorations

Whips

Hoofs:

Glue

Rattles

Headdresses

Pad Filters

String

Pillows

Ropes

Ornaments

Hair Pieces

Halters

Bracelets

Medicine Balls

Moccasin Lining

Doll Stuffing

Bones:

Fleshing Tools

Pipes

Knives

Arrowheads

Shovels

Splints

Sleds

Saddle Trees

War Clubs

Scrapers

Quirts

Awls

Paintbrushes

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Spoons

Game Dice

Tableware

Chips:

Toys

Fuel

Jewelry

Diaper Powder

Stomach Contents:

Paunch Liner:

Medicines

Paints

Wrappings for Meat

Stomach Liner:

Buckets

Collapsible Cups

Water Containers

Basins

Cooking Vessels

Canteens

Liver:

Tanning Agents

Gall:

Scrotum:

Yellow Paints

Rattles

Hind Leg Skin:

Containers

Preshaped Moccasins

III

Spirit Drawings or Petroglyphic Layering (a short story)

The blond-gotched anthropology professor, during a chance meeting, asked him if petroglyphs still had any significance to the modern-day “pickup-truck Indian.” With no offense taken, Hubert took a deep drag on his unfiltered cigarette and gave no answer but looked hard at his white questioner. The somewhat nervous professor, getting no response from the Indian, pursued the issue by asking the Indian if it was all right to come back later to the reservation from the university and have a longer chat since his college dean would probably come up with a two hundred dollar grant. The Indian thought, what the hell, why not show this guy around. A few weeks later the professor returned to the reservation, this time for a good bit longer. He met the Indian in front of his modest

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home that was surrounded by sacred cottonwood trees.

“Petroglyphs,” the Indian blurted out in a raucous voice. “Now there’s a word for you!”

“What do you call them?”

Hubert took another puff on his cigarette avoiding getting smoke in his eyes. He was trying to psych out this nervous little professor whose face betrayed apprehension. He thought he’d give this professional white man his money’s worth.

“Care for a cup of coffee and some rez fry bread,” the Indian asked.

“Sure. It looks good. Won’t you have some, too?”

“Had some before. What you university folks call petroglyphs...we call...spirit drawings.”

“Spirit drawings? Why do you call them *spirit* drawings? Weren’t they simply chiseled out?”

“Best not to sit here and gab about it. Swallow

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your coffee, and let's go have a look. Better yet, take your cup with you."

"Thanks. Where are we headed," the professor asked while munching on a tasty piece of fry bread.

"Way up yonder ridge."

They both hopped into a beat-up blue pickup truck and pulled away from the old Indian's tar paper home. Hubert turned on his eight-track tape to play his favorite Indian singer, Floyd Red Crow Westerman (who later became a movie star). He checked to see that his eagle feather was secure under his shirt. They bounced along a dirt road toward some arid sagebrush hills below the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. Bright green groves of cottonwood trees clattered in the wind and made a whispering sound along the shoreline of a winding stream that startled the professor. The sun glared brightly on the high open prairies where rock and grass met sky.

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The high mountains seemed to float above the land like distant clouds.

“You been in this country long,” the Indian asked.

“Just three years. But it’s really my second home. There are a few things I don’t like about it, though -- *freezing* winters, icy roads, maybe too much space.”

“Hmmm.”

“You been here all your life, Mr. Thorpe?”

“That and then some.”

The truck jolted over a big boulder in the road, spilling the remains of the professor’s coffee into his lap. They began to climb up a steep canyon past clumps of chokecherry bushes growing right along the white-water river. A golden eagle circled above in the cloudless sky of a great Wyoming summer day. After maneuvering around several steep switchbacks, they broke out into a level plain, but it was too rocky for vehicular travel.

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The thoughtful and slightly apprehensive professor, now with sun-burnt skin, followed the Indian on a walking trail to where he did not know. He tried to overcome his worries with a rapid succession of classroom-style questions about Indian uses of this and that. When he stepped on a piece of dead sagebrush that snapped back at him to sting his leg, he thought he was a goner until he realized it was just a stick not a snake. Hubert tried to swallow his chuckle. In the late afternoon, they reached a high sandstone cliff full of petroglyphs. The Indian became quite still and thoughtful while the dean-sponsored professor bungled along several yards behind. One of the spirit drawings was in the shape of a serpent, and by coincidence a snake skin lay just beneath the cliff. The professor, more at home back in his hometown of Bloomington, Indiana, didn't like the looks of this eery place. It gave him the willies. They continued

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their trek just a bit farther to a cool sandy spot where they could sit down in relative comfort or discomfort, depending on the viewpoint. Hubert began to explain things while the professor got out his notepad and a somewhat leaky pen.

“You see those drawings up there?”

“Yes, I see them, the nervous one responded. He really didn’t see them since he had rattlesnakes on the mind. The whole cliff was laced with these drawings ranging from sheep-like creatures with giant horns to humanoids with rainbow coronas around their heads.

“Well, these drawings are powerful medicine. They change each time you come back here to see them. Some will have five fingers one time and only four the next.” The professor thought that maybe they lost fingers to wind and erosion. The Indian could see that the visitor really wasn’t listening, so he volunteered even more

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information as he looked over at the professor's ink-blobbed notebook. Hubert really couldn't understand why non-Indian people have to take notes on matters spiritual. Are their spirits that dead? Do they take notes on how to receive communion?

“If you're seeking medicine, you come to a place like this, especially around sundown when animal voices are calling all around, but they really aren't animal voices.”

“Hunh,” asked, a quite nervous man who, perhaps, thought he was in some sort of temple of doom.

“You should fast for three days before you come here and sit at the base of the cliff. The sun will set as you listen to those voices. You think they are far away, but they're really right here just like you and me.”

“Do you see many rattlers around here this time of the year?”

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“Then, when the sun goes down, you’ll blank out. You’ll see bright-colored veins under the earth leading up to plants. Each vein is like a channel of strength for humans plagued with illnesses and fears, and the plant the vein leads to can cure this illness...”

The professor began to feel a bit faint. He unbuttoned his jacket and breathed deeply. The Indian continued.

“But how do you know Duma Upa, he who is above, has spoken to you? You’ll know by the feather that is left in your lap the next day. The sun will have no sooner set than it will have risen. It will seem like minutes. But if you come to a place like this just for the lark of it, you’ll wake up tumbled down the river.” Just then a western meadow lark sang its beautiful song.

“Hadn’t we better get out of here before dark, Mr. Thorpe? We’ll not be able to see what we are stepping on.”

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“Yeah, I guess so. We’ve stayed here long enough.”

“Mr. Thorpe, let’s have another cup of coffee back at your place where we can discuss more fully the significance of petroglyphs to modern-day Indians.”

Somehow, they stumbled back toward the truck in what seemed like half the time. Stars shone brightly over sandstone ledges giving the earth an eery look.

They followed that tumbling river to arrive finally at the truck and back to the Indian’s place, not too far from the good old main road. “Thank God,” the professor thought to himself. They really didn’t talk too much. After a few perfunctory questions, the professor said goodbye and drove all the way back to the security of his book-filled office back in Laramie where ideas don’t snap at you. He wondered why he hadn’t done all this by telephone. Leaving his office and returning to his wife

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and home, he was no longer sure of the difference between a petroglyph and a spirit drawing.

CHAPTER SIX

*Wyoming-Osaka Exchange (but still managing to get
above 7,000 feet)*

Homesick for Wyoming

Somehow I feel so terribly homesick
here in misty, mystical Japan where I
think of driving west from Cheyenne and
I see the Laramie Range veiled in cloud
and strands of fog spreading over prairies
with the pungent scent of damp sagebrush.

I remember going to a quaint old ranch
house
outside of Laramie with a crackling fire and
drinking steaming, cowboy-strong coffee.
All night long at the ranch, I hear coyotes
howling at the moon peeking through
clouds.

R.Fleck, *Don't Fence Me In*

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I

Mount Fuji

In 1981 the University of Wyoming began a teaching exchange with Osaka University in Japan, a serious subduction zone of tectonic plates. I was the first UW Professor to go with my family for a full year. I was sent to teach Japanese students American Studies and literature and one of the books I chose as a text was a modern paperback version of John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), a bi-autobiography as told to Neihardt by Black Elk, holy man of the Oglala Lakota at his home on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota. The Japanese students became fascinated with Black Elk's great vision of the flaming rainbow tipi and the six grandfathers from the six directions (north, east, south, west, earthward, and skyward). I explained that they gave young Black Elk the power of the six directions to help

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his people regain a sense of balance in the world of the Wasichus (they who are many) who were pouring into Indian territories from the east. He received the power to heal and make whole, the power to make war, and the power to transcend time and space by way of spirit travel. It was too bad I couldn't have set up a tipi for them in the middle of this Japanese campus!

I remember one time serving on a panel with Japanese professors on the topic of American literature. They were amazed that I chose *Black Elk Speaks* as one of the most inspiring books to read and teach in American literature. It felt almost as if Nicholas Black Elk himself was urging me to say so. The professors said that it was strange that they never heard of it. But then, again, how many significant Japanese classics had I heard of? But one professor mentioned that this title had been translated into Japanese several years earlier. I

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greatly enjoyed the conviviality of Osaka University students and faculty especially of fascinating colleagues like Professor Minoru Fujita, a noted Shakespearean scholar and Professor Mamoru Saito who had a deep interest in the Ainu culture of Hokkaido and Uichi Morioka who loved Sherwood Anderson's writings. Professor Saito was working on a translation of a contemporary Ainu novel from their language into Japanese. Many a wonderful lunch I had with my Japanese friends at the faculty lounge called *Machi-Kani-Yama-Cho* nestled under a campus forest of ginko trees. Fortunately, my children seemed to enjoy attending the English-language school in nearby Kobe called the Canadian Academy where they learned Japanese as well as the traditional subjects of their grade levels. They greatly enjoyed using the *fude* (brush) dipped in ink to make Kanji characters for written Japanese. Rich played

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on the Canadian Academy soccer team that traveled to numerous other schools in the Kansai area, including places that only he got to in Japan. But my wife felt a good bit isolated until she started taking classes in Japanese culture and language. One thing for sure, we all dearly missed Laramie and the open spaces above 7,000 feet altitude. One of our solutions, however, was to climb Mount Fuji rising from sea level to 12,338 feet—higher than Medicine Bow Peak. While we all had more than memorable experiences in Japan (the subject for another book), surely getting above 7,000 feet on Mount Fuji was one of the most memorable.

Amid the golden ginko trees and rich scarlet maples of autumn, I leafed through the eye-catching pamphlets describing that mystical mountain to the north. During the winter months, family, friends, and I had rambled over hiking trails of a small extinct volcano

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called Kabutoyama (Helmet Mountain) and the nearby Rokko Mountains that rise 2,000 feet above sea level between Kobe and Osaka. Our home stood at the edge of the Rokko Mountain-Inland Sea National Park overlooking a vast green and rolling countryside where we lived for one brief year. Although the Rokko Mountains are indeed alluring, with their lush cedar forests, ferns, and occasional Buddhist shrines, I still felt that in order to experience Japan completely, one must ascend Fuji San (Mount Fuji) to greet the rising sun well above the elevation of Laramie.

Some of my colleagues argued that Fuji San (literally Origin Mountain) was nothing more than a tourist attraction. They felt that climbers had littered the trails so much that the mountain had become a mere sham of what it once was. Nonetheless, my desire to climb the mountain, sham or not, persisted. I immersed

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myself in Japanese art and culture and in the work of the famous woodblock-print artist Ichiryusai (or Ando) Hokusai, especially his tantalizing “Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji.” One of my favorite of Hokusai’s portrayals was the eighteenth view from Noboto Bay, in which the great, cone-shaped mountain of snow is seen from under a Buddhist *torii* (a gateway to a shrine). Fuji was gradually becoming for me a kind of shrine in itself, of a sort I did not quite comprehend.

During the height of the cherry blossom season in early April, my family and I left for South Korea to meet an old friend and his family. I had not seen Jonny Boucher in twenty-four years, since back in Acadia National Park in Maine. We had climbed Mount Katahdin—of Thoreau fame—together then, and had planned a reunion this year in the by climbing Halla-San on Cheju-do Island, off the main Korean peninsula. Our

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climb of 6,398-foot Halla-San (the highest mountain in South Korea), with its richly varied skirting forests, was magnificent, and our view out into the East China Sea contained colors and shapes worthy of a woodblock print by Hokusai, but I really thought of this ascent merely as preparation for 12,388-foot Mount Fuji.

During the remainder of spring, back in flower-flooded Japan, we gradually planned our climb with our Japanese friend Yuko Kobayashi, who had not been on Fuji San since her early childhood. The overbearing, humid heat of early July, combined with the buzzing locusts and with my having to correct hundreds of final examinations of Osaka University students, made me wonder if Fuji were nothing more than a hazy illusion. How would we have the energy to climb such a mountain in all this heat?

Our date of departure brought dark clouds and

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light rain. Six of us walked down a steep hill to Nigawa's railway station to travel to Osaka Station, in order to board the *Shinkansen* (Bullet Train). I had never experienced such sweltering heat, and our heavy backpacks hardly helped. However, we all cooled off on the *Shinkansen* as we whirled through the Japanese countryside at 140 miles per hour. Tea plantations, rice paddies, and tile-roofed villages with temples blurred past us, as if all were a dream.

At Shizuoka we changed trains for Fujinomiya. A misty (but not rainy), Mount Fuji rose miles above us and above the surrounding rice fields. At Fujinomiya we boarded a gogome (fifth-station) bus and began to wind our way past lush green tea plantations and to gain altitude through pine and spruce forests. Eventually we arrived at the fifth station, at 7,200 feet—the same elevation as our home in Laramie, Wyoming! We

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changed our clothes, procured some walking sticks, and began our climb. Our nighttime destination was the eighth station (hachigome), at an altitude of 10,000 feet, where we would have dinner, stay overnight, and get up early the next morning to continue our ascent.

Maura, I, our children and Yuko hiked up the *unlittered*, steep, and winding trail past phantom-like strands of pines twisted by the elements. The mist thickened, and brief spits of rain hit our bodies and the trailside volcanic dust at irregular intervals. The valleys below offered nothing but an endless sea of gray. Occasionally we gained glimpses of a dark massiveness rising high above the trailing strands of upslope mist. Our backpacks began to feel very heavy, and I started to feel like one of the old parents of Japanese legend who raised a young girl whose original home was the moon. When she became twenty years of age, her ancient foster

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parents climbed to the summit of Fuji San to return her to the moon. It felt as though we were climbing to the moon itself after a short rest at the sixth station (*rokugome*) where we had our walking sticks marked for our first station gained by climbing.

The mist thickened. I had the sensation that I had become part of the background in a Chinese landscape scroll painting by Ta Ch'ih. It began to rain harder, forcing us to cover our heads with plastic rain gear. My three children—Rich, Michelle, and Maureen—were tiring quickly, as was our Japanese friend, whose pack was immense. The ground became quite slippery, and loose volcanic chunks tricked our feet with every step. The seventh station (*sichigome*) was welcomed. We remained long enough to have our walking sticks marked and left quickly because it had become dark, and much rainier; we all wished that the seventh was the eighth

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station!

After much effort on an increasingly slippery trail, we wearily checked into the eighth station at last, unloading our damp gear and walking in stocking feet across wooden floors to an open charcoal pit, or *kotatsu*, to warm our hands. For a moment or two I thought I was back at our neighbor's cabin high in the Snowy Range at Brooklyn Lake until Yuko ordered six steaming bowls of *udon* (Japanese noodle soup) with mountain vegetables and rice. We kneeled at a low table and voraciously ate our alpine supper. Our breath added steam to the thick air of this stark room. The rain pounded down on the roof, and thankfully we were securely off that hiking trail for now, anyway! The only warm place was either the charcoal pit or in one's sleeping bag, so we decided to turn in early, as we would be up at 3 a.m. to continue the climb and greet the rising sun up on the snowy summit.

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Apparently one hundred and twenty people had planned to sleep at the eighth station that night, but virtually all had cancelled due to the heavy rains. Our group of six people, and three older couples, were the only ones present on the chilly night of July 21, 1982.

I woke up at 2 a.m. hoping to get up and drink some cowboy-strong coffee at this ranch house. But no, an old man snored heavily, and the echoes of his snoring brought me back to reality here in the mountain barracks. I couldn't drift back to sleep and instead got up and walked out into a dazzling, starry night completely devoid of rain clouds. The stars gleamed overhead, and the small towns of Mishima and Fujinomiya near the eastern coast glowed far below like underworld constellations. Mount Fuji looked as though it had become part of the Milky Way, with its upper snowfields blending into the heavens. I felt like Shimamura, a

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character in Yasunari Kawabata's famous novel *Snow Country* (*Yuki Guni*), as he stood in silence outside in the mountainous, wintry north country of Japan:

The Milky Way. Shimamura too looked up, and he felt himself floating into the Milky Way. Its radiance was so near that it seemed to him to take him up to it. Was this the bright vastness the poet?

Basho saw when he wrote of the Milky Way arched over a stormy sea?

I stood and stared outside the eighth station until my teeth chattered. The promised warmth of the building finally pulled me back inside. By now the noisy old man was up, but my family and friend were still in a deep sleep. Crawling back into my sleeping bag, I quickly dozed off for a half hour or so until I heard a loud crunching sound. Maura awakened startled, and wondered if Fuji San was becoming an active volcano

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again after nearly four hundred years of being dormant. Both of us dressed quickly and went outside to find hundreds of Japanese hikers with headlamps crunching up the mountainside from the fifth station, looking like mythical beings attempting to return to heaven's gates.

Astonished, Maura and I went back inside and discovered the rest of our group up and eating a breakfast of oranges, seaweed crackers, and hot green tea (*o'cha*). The first glow of morning's light was already visible from far out in the Pacific Ocean as we hit the trail. I reflected that Japan's rising sun is Wyoming's setting sun. We slowly hoofed along toward luminous snowfields 2,000 feet above us. All of the valleys below had thickly clouded in.

About eight hundred vertical feet above the eighth station, a Buddhist *torii* framed the rising sun. The *torii* glowed red and then gold above the black lava rocks.

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And then one of the most mystical alpine views of my experience suddenly sprung before me. The pyramid shape of Fuji San cast itself on the lower clouds and moved ever so westward. Only one time before had I seen this Brocken Specter (as John Muir called it in *The Mountains of California*), and that was on Longs Peak, Colorado, twenty-two years earlier described in my other book *Desert Rims to Mountains High*. Except for Maura, all of my climbing party had become weary, tired, and sick, despite the beauty of the Brocken Specter. They suffered from altitude sickness because they had been in sea-level Japan too long. I suggested we stop at the ninth station (*kugome*) for some restorative tea as well as have our walking sticks marked. It was warm and cozy there, with some lively but plaintive Japanese folksongs as background music.

Maura volunteered to stay at the ninth station

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(11,000 feet) with the sick ones while my restored daughter Maureen and I hiked up to the ninth and a half station for a sweet rice cake and another drink. Soon, we slowly and carefully picked our way along the lava trail to the tenth (*jugome*) and final station. It was chilly at the summit of 12,388 feet but very exhilarating to peer down into the 600-foot-deep crater with angular snowfields slanting straight down. The temperature at 8 a.m. was a blustering 34 degrees F. compared to perhaps 100 degrees down at Fujinomiya. We ducked into a Buddhist *jinja*, or shrine, to warm up and to chat in broken Japanese with one of the monks in red hoods kneeling on the *tatami* mats of the highest shrine in Japan. He signed our temple-signature book to give us, perhaps, one of the rarest of temple signatures. All of Honshu Island remained enshrouded in silver banks of cloud far, far below. But here, in the lodge of the sun, we stood

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humbly in the radiant brightness of white snow and a crisp sky, crisp all the way back to Wyoming.

Maureen and I had our walking sticks stamped and quickly bounced down the trail to the ninth station. Maura, Rich, Michelle and Yuko were all feeling a bit better after imbibing cups of hot green tea along with rice cakes. As we collectively dropped down to the eighth station, everyone's spirit improved. We rallied and chose to take a different route down the mountain, passing through lush red lava formations by means of narrow, convoluted chimneys that required a little rock work. All of lower Japan still lay salted away in mist and cloud. As we eased our way through the old lava shapes of this bright-red section of Fuji San, it very much reminded me of Hokusai's thirty-second view, "Summer Showers beneath the Peak."

We finally cleared the cliffs and, having let up our

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guard, trotted down a loose lava-gravel trail, when I suddenly slipped. The rubble rolled under me and I slid on my arm for about six feet. A nasty scratch scored my exposed skin, and my blood began dripping on already rouge lava. The women in our party came rapidly to my aid and poured water on my wound and applied bandages. At that moment, both my body and spirit became fused with this powerful mountain—it became an origin myth for me all my living days. Somehow I didn't mind making Fuji San a tad bit redder. We had but one short month left in Japan before our welcomed return to Laramie.

Postscript

Having Professor Minoru Fujita return with us on exchange to Laramie for a year's stay along with his daughter Izumi, was almost like not completely leaving Japan.

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They frequently invited us over to their living quarters for a nice meal of *okonomiyaki* (Japanese pancakes with cabbage and ham mixed in) and some sake. We in turn invited them to our place, once for an Easter dinner during a fierce snowstorm. Fujita Sensei roared with laughter saying, “Snow on Easter Day would be impossible in Japan!” All the while, I attended his class in intermediate Japanese in which we read a bit of Kawabata’s *Snow Country* in Japanese and learned to speak a bit more in that language.

What I most appreciated was Professor Fujita’s asking me to assist him in translating modern Japanese poets* into English. If he wasn’t quite sure of the full sense of an English word he had chosen, we could discuss its various connotations in English as well as the Japanese word being translated. This discussion sometimes resulted in selecting a different English word

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that was more appropriate. We discussed the difficulty in dealing with connotation. For instance, we would discuss just the title of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* and what difference there was between it and "Lost Paradise." For Fujita Sensei "Lost Paradise" is far more *final* than "Paradise Lost." For him "Paradise Lost" connotes a process of being lost that is still happening.

Meanwhile his daughter Izumi tutored our girls in Japanese resulting in their choosing to take Japanese years later in College. I will never forget taking Fujita Sensei and his daughter out into the nighttime prairies of Wyoming on our way to "The Old Corral" restaurant in Centennial. When he looked up at the glowing Milky Way for the first time ever (unseen in the hazy skies of industrial Osaka), he said, "Now I can at least begin to understand the mind of Einstein!" The Wyoming-Osaka Exchange was more than rewarding on both sides.

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*Here is an example of one of our translations of the poet Boshu Kawabata's haiku "Fiddleheads of Ferns":

Zemmai	nō	jekkō	Gentle fiddleheads
nō	nō	jō	arise (sprout) like no characters
	ji	dō	in earthly paradise
	bakari		
	nō		

We decided to change the word "arise" (too abstract) to "sprout" (more physical). .

II

The Missing Panelist (a short story)

"I really don't want to serve on that psychic panel," Fred Woebler muttered to himself as he approached the auditorium. That super psychic fellow from India just plain scared him; besides, what was an Exchange English Professor from McConnaghy State College doing on a psychic panel in Japan? It just didn't make any sense, that's all. So what if I had taught *Black Elk Speaks* here

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in Japan—does that make me an expert on paranormal phenomena?

Fred Woebler hesitatingly mounted the platform and sat down in one of the panelist's chairs, and low and behold, the East Indian super psychic sat down next to him along with some psychology and history professors from Kabutoyama Gakuin University. The East Indian explained that he was going to do something unusual by having his fellow panelists go out of their bodies to see what was on a certain page in the *Mainichi Daily News* placed on top of a table fifty feet away.

“Damn it,” Woebler thought. “I should have worn a garlic clove or something.”

“Relax, fellow panelists,” the psychic ordered. “Think of the happiest moment in your life.”

Woebler thought and thought and thought, but every moment that he considered to be happy was tinged with a

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bit of sadness. What the hell is a happy moment, he kept thinking to himself.

“Now think of yourself as a piece of floating cotton, very light. Think of yourself floating in air. Relax!”

Fred held back a fart still trying to think of a happy moment. Then the audience appeared far below him, but he wasn't absolutely sure.

“Concentrate on your third eye, a ball of light, and go under that *Mainichi Daily News* to the page that is lying flat against the table and tell me what you see.”

Two Japanese professors saw something blue. Another one saw something brown.

“Mr. Woebler. I haven't heard from you!”

Fred just wondered about some fifty feet over the audience far above the newspaper and began to worry which one of those bodies was his. The East Indian asked

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for more details about the newspaper page and everyone answered correctly except for Woebler who was now being deliberately ignored. The super psychic from India went over to the newspaper, and sure enough the page in question contained a holiday picture of a brownish tropical beach above a bright blue sea.

“Return to your bodies,” the psychic ordered, and they all jerked back into their frames sitting in their chairs. But Woebler wandered far and high and became frightened.

“My son,” a voice called.

“Yes...who are you?”

“Do not be frightened. I shall help you if you do me a favor.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Let me go to your body as I have been “dead” many years.

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“Who are you?”

“It matters not. I would like to go to your body and answer some of those foolish questions down there in that great assembly room.”

“But who are you?”

“If you let me go down for a few minutes, I will guide you back to your body.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux.”

“Oh, my God.”

“No, I am not God, just a humble Indian.”

“No...I didn't mean...”

“I will go down now, alright?”

“Yes, surely, yes.”

Woebler's body jerked, and then the scrutinizing East Indian psychic said that he was glad to see the English professor back.

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“We are talking about the value of psychic phenomena and how it may enrich daily life.”

Woebler/Black Elk spoke:

“What you say my high-minded friend is too simple. That’s like saying I wear socks with my shoes. Why bother saying it?”

“What do you mean, Woebler? You do not like what I’m saying,” asked the psychic in a superior tone.

“Psychic phenomena, as you put it, *is* daily life. Go to a cottonwood grove and sit and stare and you will see what those cottonwoods really are. They are not just trunk, bark, and branches, but spirits pointing to the source.”

The East Indian chuckled at what he supposed was this two-bit English professor’s joke and said, “I see, wise one. Do not make jest of me, for I have crushing powers.”

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Meanwhile the real Woebler floated above Mount Fuji, so high he could see distant Rockies. He moved over to the American side of space and looked down at tipi encampments and talked with tribesmen about the frozen waters of the Rockies that make the valleys fertile below and how the Great Spirit *Tongashula* teaches this. Cottonwoods follow descending streams to the Platte and Missouri Rivers and always remind us of the source, and that is why they are sacred.

Black Elk floated up to Fred Woebler for a split second and asked him how he was getting along.

“Let’s trade places,” Professor Woebler said to Black Elk, “I love this spirit world. It has given me such happiness.”

“I think you tell me the truth, son. I have fought my battle against the white man on earth years and years ago, but if you will let me return to wage battle against a

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new kind of power, perhaps for once I can win.”

Fred, now in a delightful place, nodded his head in accord, and Black Elk instantaneously returned to the panel with a gleam in his eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Forever Yellowstone

Along the Yellowstone

The Yellowstone gently flows with swirling eddies
smooth as clear brown ice, looking as though
Hansel and Gretel had whirled there on fairy-tale
skates.

But wait, now the river twists
through valleys of buffalo and gray-green
sagebrush at a much faster rate.

If you listen closely, you can hear thundering
waterfalls only miles ahead where the
river plunges three hundred feet as liberated spirit
vapors in streaks of white and green.

R. Fleck, *Don't Fence Me In.*



Old Faithful Geyser in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.
Photo by Richard Fleck

I

Yellowstone's Features

Yellowstone is one of the most special wild places on our planet. Within its boundaries lies the largest fresh water lake above 7,000 feet in North America, Lake Yellowstone which occupies 136 square miles and is twenty miles long by fifteen miles wide miles. Yellowstone has incredibly beautiful landscapes

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including the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone with the Upper and Lower waterfalls, the peaceful Yellowstone River, before it approaches the Upper Falls, that flows gently through vast buffalo meadows, geological features such as boiling mud pots, steaming pools the likes of Morning Glory Pool and Prism Lake, hissing cauldrons like the Dragon's Cauldron and world famous geysers that include Old Faithful, Grand Geyser, Fountain Geyser and the unpredictable Steamboat Geyser that may erupt once every five to seven years shooting water up as high as 400 feet. There are only five places on our planet that have major geysers: the Haukador area of southern Iceland, the El Tatio region of the Andes in Chile, the Taupo volcanic zone on the North Island of New Zealand, the Kamchatka Peninsula of Asian Russia, and in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming that has the highest percentage of geysers of the entire planet.. I can

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at least, later in this chapter, compare Yellowstone's Old Faithful Cone Geyser with the Strokkur Fountain Geyser of Iceland. Yellowstone also has high, snow-capped mountains like Mount Washburn (10,243 feet) above Dunraven Pass and Electric Peak (10,969 feet) in the Montana portion of the national park just at the northwest corner. It is from the experience of climbing rugged Electric Peak and not the California Sierra that John Muir wrote, "Come to the mountains and hear their glad tidings." The Yellowstone super-volcano or caldera covers a sizable chunk of what is today Yellowstone National Park. This caldera has the gigantic size of 45 by 34 miles and has erupted three times over the past 2.1 million years, the latest being 640,000 years ago. Some scientists believe that a fourth eruption could occur any time between now and the next several thousand years. The red clay of Georgia is a gift from Yellowstone's last

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eruption! In addition to Yellowstone's having a "hot spot" a few thousand feet below its surface it is also, like Japan and Iceland, a subduction zone where the movement of grinding plates causes thousands of minor earthquakes and numerous major quakes every century or less.

We have visited Yellowstone over two dozen times from the mid-1960's through 2007. We have come just by ourselves (Maura and I), with family members, with long-time friends, and with Japanese exchange professors from Osaka University during their one-year stay in Wyoming. We have followed in the footsteps of John Muir's visit in 1881 and have had several visits with Superintendent Robert Barbee who was a fellow seasonal ranger with me in Rocky Mountain National Park many years earlier.

But first let us turn just a bit to Yellowstone's

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fascinating human history. When I asked my Shoshone friend Rupert Weeks about Yellowstone, he said that legends have it that Yellowstone was considered a hellish place where things are falling apart, where the earth has no stability. Yet early day Shoshones did fish in Lake Yellowstone before the coming of white man. Some of their fishing channels made of rock can still be seen along the shoreline. These jetties of dark-gray rock funneled the fish into a narrow channel, the end of which had weirs made of supple willow branches. These weirs trapped fish in much the same way a lobster trap works off the coast of Maine. The willow branches at the mouth of the weir are wide enough for several fish to swim in, but the weir gets narrower and narrower until the fish is trapped at the bait-filled bottom end because it cannot figure a way back out. These early-day Shoshones would have delightful fish roasts from time to time with

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flickering flames and sparks reflected off the lake's clear waters.

The first Euro-American to explore the Yellowstone area in 1807-1808 was John Colter, hunter and explorer, who served on the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806). He not only furnished the expedition with fresh wild meat, but also helped find routes (along with Sacajawea) to the Columbia River Valley and Pacific Ocean and made contact with the Nez Perce Indians who gave further assistance to the expedition. After being discharged from the expedition, he helped build the first trading post, Fort Raymond, at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers in 1807. He helped make contact with the Crow Indians for fur trade at Fort Raymond. In late 1807 and well into the bitter cold winter of 1808, Colter explored the Grand Teton mountain country and northward into the

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southwest corner of Yellowstone trapping fur-bearing animals including beavers and wolves. He reportedly arrived at the shores of Lake Yellowstone and what is now called the West Thumb Geyser Basin. No one at Fort Raymond believed a word of what John Colter said about steaming pools, bubbling mud pots and strange geysers. They jokingly called the land Colter described as “Colter’s Hell.”

Colter was not the only early visitor to have been considered a bit wacky. In 1827 a fur trapper named Daniel Potts composed one of the earliest letters that actually described the thermal features of this strange area; of course, no one believed him. Joe Meek, a few years later, told stories of his fur trapping in a land of fire and brimstone and was met with laughter. And when mountain man Jim Bridger described the area during the 1830’s as having waterfalls that spout upwards, he was

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considered to be a mountain man who could conjure up mighty good tall-tales. In 1834 Warren Ferris of the American Fur Trade Company visited Yellowstone as its first “tourist” and was the first person to use the word “geyser” in his written account published in the *Western Literary Messenger*. Then, as a result of Father Francis Xavier Kuppens Indian-guided tour in 1865 and his ensuing visit with the first territorial governor, Thomas F. Meagher, the governor was convinced that these other-worldly features not only existed but they should be set aside as a national park for future generations.

1870 proved to be a turning point after Henry D. Washburn, surveyor-general of the Montana Territory, is credited with being the first true “discoverer” of Yellowstone by scientifically describing these strange thermal features in an official territorial report that named the most striking feature of the area “Old

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Faithful.” In the following year Ferdinand V. Hayden, former Civil War veteran and first head of the new U.S. Geological Survey, was appointed by Congress to make an official exploration of this region. He brought along with him professional geologists as well as the artist Thomas Moran and photographer William Henry Jackson whose watercolors and photographs formed a convincing part of a 300 page report that soundly convinced Congress and U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant to create the nation’s and world’s first national park in 1872 some sixty-five years after John Colter’s visit.

II

Getting There

We first left for Yellowstone in 1967 by way of the Grand Teton Mountains. I had a university summer research grant to write a long essay or even a book which

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I tentatively called “Winding through the Rockies” with a section on Yellowstone. The work resulted in a small pamphlet called “Thunder in the Rockies” published by the Thoreau Fellowship back in 1970. That pamphlet grew through time as a collection of essays called *Breaking Through the Clouds* (Pruett, 2004) a poetry collection entitled *Mountains on My Mind* (Amazon Kindle, 2013). with mostly free verse depicting the Rocky Mountain Chain from Big Bend National Park, Texas all the way to Glacier National Park, Montana. Each poem of *Mountains on My Mind* was published individually in the online edition of *Climbing Magazine*. But, way back in early June, 1967 Maura and I headed for Grand Teton National Park with a carload of camping gear and food. We at last drove over *Togwotee* (in Shoshone, “shoots with arrow”) Pass down into Jackson Hole with incredibly jagged white mountains spreading

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before us—just like a scene out of the movie *Shane*. We drove up to Colter Bay Campground named after John Colter and quickly set up our rather large blue and orange tent as it started to rain with thunder booming and echoing off Mount Moran rising 12,605 feet (named after Thomas Moran) rising skyward into thunder clouds. Jackson Lake started to get pelted with heavy raindrops mixed with splashing hail. As we huddled around a campfire trying to stay warm in our ponchos, an older couple from Massachusetts asked if they could join us by enticing us with a big jug of wine. We chatted about Massachusetts where we had lived for two years before coming to Wyoming. By evening the thunder showers had cleared away and a brilliant array of stars spread across the sky. Just then, a very noisy group of youths pulled up in a camper van and parked right next to us with boom boxes playing at a high pitch. It was hard to

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sleep that night, but thanks to the old man from Massachusetts we got our revenge. He woke up (or rather got up) at 5 a.m. to go to a water spigot right next to the noisy ones' van. He did the old "hospital trick" of turning on and off the spigot a half dozen times, and each and every one of those kids trudged out of their van at an ungodly hour to go and urinate in the rest room.

After our quick breakfast, we packed up our gear and drove to Jenny Lake to take the Cascade Canyon Trail up into the Teton Range. The canyon is spectacular with Mount St. John to the north at 11,430 feet and Mount Owens (12,928 feet) and Mount Teewinot (12,325 feet) to the south. Cascade Creek lived up to its name by roaring almost out of its bounds after the previous night's heavy rain. Our trail became fairly steep after rising out of Jenny Lake ever upward with gorgeous June blossoms of white glacier lilies, marsh marigolds, bright pink

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elephant heads and fuzzy white alpine bistort. We hiked up past some grazing mule deer toward tree line. For a moment or two I thought I was back in Rocky Mountain National Park except that these mountains rose up like jagged fingers of gray rock plastered with patches of snow. We thought we just might go for Mount St. John when out of the blue, a lightning bolt streaked through the sky followed by a immediate roaring rumble of thunder. With Maura suddenly terrified out of her wits, we had no other choice but to trot back down to Jenny Lake and proceed toward Yellowstone.

III

Our First Days in Yellowstone

We entered Yellowstone National Park from the Tetons during a cold snow-mixed-with rain storm where rows on end of tall pines swayed in the wind. We decided *not* to

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set up camp in Yellowstone above 7,000 feet but rather drive on up to Canyon Village and book a cozy cabin (back in the 1960's one could do this easily in early June. Today a person needs to book one year in advance!). Just before arriving along the shores of a white-capped Lake Yellowstone, we encountered our first "bear jam." About a dozen cars backed up behind a pickup truck that had stopped to take pictures of a family of black bears crossing the highway. A sow led her cubs into the ferny woods after staring at a bunch of weird creatures coming out of steel contrivances. We, too, stepped out of our car to watch the procession of bears click-clacking their claws on the asphalt road. Fortunately none of the tourists that day taunted the bears by hiding pieces of bread behind their backs forgetting that bears have better noses than eyes.

Shortly afterwards, rain or not, we had to stop and

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get out of our car to wander past the bubbling mud pots, crystal-clear steaming pools and tiny spouting geysers of West Thumb Geyser Basin right along the shores of Lake Yellowstone with quite large waves thrashing against the shoreline. A flock of pelicans flew gingerly above the thrashing waves. We stood in disbelief at what we saw, much like the early explorers and fur trappers. One year later, my parents brought to Yellowstone a couple from Philadelphia. When Bill Zinger got out of the car at West Thumb, he told my father those steaming pools couldn't be all that hot and to prove it he stuck his index finger into one of them. He let out a screech that would have frightened a herd of moose! Fortunately, my parents had a first aid kit with some suave.

It still rained hard with sleet mixed in as we turned northward away from the lake toward Canyon Village and followed the very softly flowing Yellowstone River

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with its gently simmering surface of circles constantly rising as the river steadily flowed. The Yellowstone, in this respect, resembles the Loire River in France. We stopped the car at one spot to take in the view of bison snorting and grazing on grasses along the shoreline. Rainfall hardly stopped them from feeding. Their thick fur coats shed water much better than our ponchos. Being along the Yellowstone River was like losing a thousands years; we imagined ourselves to be ancestral Shoshones setting up fish weirs. A thunderbolt shocked us back to what we perceived as present-day reality. Within a half hour so, we drove to Canyon Village and procured a wee cabin in the woods for the next few days. We headed for the lodge to be seated by a big window in the dining hall and ordered a fantastic meal called “Canyon Village Baked Stuffed Zucchini,” the local chief’s invention. We each got served a big plate with a foot-long zucchini that

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had been cored and stuffed with rice, breadcrumbs, onions, tomatoes, shredded cheddar cheese and baked to a piping hot temperature. We didn't care if it was raining and thundering outside at all as we ate our dinner in complete satisfaction. A crackling log fire not too far away made it even better.

Back in our cabin, we planned to take a hike the next day down to the base of the Lower Falls (308 feet vertical or twice as high as Niagara Falls) rain or shine. We were pleased to see the moon shining through our window just before we went to sleep. The next morning proved to be crisp and clear, and after some hot coffee and honey-covered buns, we put on our jackets and hit the trail down the road from our cabin. After a bit of a walk through the forest, we arrived at the edge of the sulfur-yellow Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone (*Les Pierres Jaunes* as the French trappers called it). A large

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jet-black raven perched itself on top of a dead pine tree and croaked at us as we began our hopping-dance downward. The rising yellow canyon walls all around us seemed otherworldly. The roar of the falls tricked us into thinking a thunderstorm was approaching. Down, ever down went the trail past gnarled pines and waxy strands of kinnicknick. At last we came to a viewing post where the earth seemed to shake from the power of these falls. They tumble over dark volcanic rhyolite cliffs with more volume than any other waterfall in North America. We found it hard to believe that just one mile upstream, the Yellowstone River flowed with a gentle non-chalance. Here the river foamed and roared at the base of the falls to eventually smooth out and flow with a far more soft-flowing current toward the open Montana prairies and the wide Missouri River.

We wanted to experience the Upper Falls just a

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half mile upstream and, after climbing way back up to the rim and our cabin, we got back in our car to drive to the Upper Falls Rim Trail to experience the dizzying 109 foot thundering, almost hypnotizing, plunging of the Upper Falls. The earth under our feet shook and the immense force of the water dizzied us and almost drew us out of our own bodies to take our spirits on an incredible plunge down in green-streaked water. Yellowstone is a kind of place that remains in the back of your mind until life's end and then some.

That night, during another rain storm, we read aloud John Muir's "Yellowstone" Chapter from his book *Our National Parks* (1901) to enhance our visit to the geyser basin areas of the park during the next day.

Shortly after arriving in Yellowstone at Mammoth Springs, John Muir wrote to his wife Louie Wanda on August 20, 1881 that "the general appearance of the

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country hereabouts is gray and forbidding, few trees except in hollows and ravines. Gray sage hills with here and there rough gray junipers and two-leaved pines [lodgepoles], far away removed from the freshness and leafy beauty of Yosemite. The piles of salt from the springs hundreds of feet in height stained with many colors interblended look like the refuse heaps about chemical and dye works, so far as I have seen.” It is probable that Muir let his nauseous stomach, so sick from a bad lunch on the train hours before, affect his first impressions of Yellowstone. But after he was there a few days, his mood changed. As before mentioned he climbed into the alpine heights of Electric Peak to receive its glad tidings. In *Our National Parks* that we read in our cabin, he more cheerfully wrote, “A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling. ‘Look up and down and around you’! And a multitude of still, small voices

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may be heard directing you through all this transient, shifting show of things called ‘substantial’ into the truly substantial spiritual world whose forms of flesh and wood, rock and water, air and sunshine, only well conceal, and to learn that here is heaven and the dwelling place of angels.”

We awakened early, and, after a quick breakfast, departed for one of the “thousand Yellowstone wonders,” namely, the world-famous Old Faithful Geyser. The two geysers from different parts of the planet that I can compare, specifically Old Faithful, Wyoming and Strokkur, Iceland are similar in many ways. Both Yellowstone and Iceland have “hot spots” of magma and super-heated rock only three to four miles below the Earth’s surface. Both places are dominated by fire and ice. Both places have an over-abundance of water that makes contact with magma to produce steam, super-

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heated steam at 265 degrees F. In the case of Old Faithful, super-heated steam erupts on average every ninety minutes. Old Faithful's volume can be as much as 8,000 gallons of steamy water (provided by melting snow from the slopes of an old glacial basin) that shoots as high as 185 feet into the sky for as long as five minutes (sometimes only a little over one minute 100 feet into the sky). Whereas Strokkur Geyser in southwestern Iceland (not too far from Reykyavik), erupts far more frequently between four and eight minutes with eruptions going as high as eighty feet for two minutes or so.

Maura and I walked up to the wooden benches at the side of Old Faithful along with thirty or forty other people in early June, 1967. The earth began to rumble and the first few steamy squirts shot a few feet upwards and splashed down to the rhyolite cone. Then, within a few minutes the ground shook as Old Faithful shot super-

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heated steam and condensed water as high as an eighteen-story building for nearly five minutes. We remained mesmerized and awe-struck and just had to wait around, like kids, another hour or so for the next eruption. Forty-six years later, we stood within twenty-five feet of Strokkur in Iceland. Again a rumble, but instead of a sudden geyser of steam and water coming out of a cone, Strokkur built up into a beautiful fountain of Mediterranean-blue mound of water before exploding into the sky some eighty feet. Once or twice it did a double eruption, but we had only to wait a few minutes for the next blue mound of water. The biggest difference was that Old Faithful was our first-ever geyser. Of course we wandered around the various geyser basins that day to see Riverside Geyser as well as the unusual Enchinus Geyser erupting from a pool to splash about like a furious storm with white waves along the rocky coast of Maine.

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It even smelled like a tidal pool full of starfish. Maura and I could not stop telling our friends in Laramie of the wonders we had seen in Yellowstone.

IV

Other Visits

On another occasion, my family and I went up to visit with my long-time friend Robert Barbee who was Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park during the 1980's. He and his wife Carol invited us into his home at up Mammoth Springs, the former home of the commanding officer of the U.S. Army unit that was assigned to protect Yellowstone long before the National Park Service had been established. A short story of mine about this period of time will close this chapter. Bob and Carol had a nice cookout going in their backyard where we sat down to enjoy a conversation about our past days

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in Rocky Mountain National Park where we made a midnight climb years ago of Longs Peak (*Nestoaieux* in Arapaho) to greet the rising sun at a very chilly 14,256 feet. We chatted about writers and artists who inspired Bob through the years. His two favorite authors were John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Without them, he reflected, “America would still be in a neo-Stone Age of rampant destruction of our natural heritage.” He then showed us several signed Ansel Adams black and white photographs of Yosemite Valley where Bob served as Chief Ranger and got to know Ansel as a friend, a privilege very few of us have had.

Parting ways, we left the Barbees to take the kids on a trail recommended by Bob somewhat away from tourists called “Paint Pot Hill Trail” above Norris Geyser Basin. We entered the spruce-fir forest a few miles away from the crowds. There in the deep woods lined with

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bright red Indian paintbrush, we mused over a tiny thimble-sized hole in the ground violent with activity—bubbling water and hissing steam—like some miniature Mount St. Helens! Just a few yards farther, and we saw two other baby paint pots churning away. By the time we finished walking along the loop, we had seen perhaps several dozen miniature furies doing their thing, alone in the woods. Our kids giggled with delight while watching these tiny eruptions in the woods.

I had to go up to Cody, Wyoming for a meeting at the Buffalo Bill Center for a jointly sponsored educational program involving the university and the museum. Since Cody is not that far from Yellowstone's east entrance, I gave a call to Bob Barbee (twenty months after the end of the great fire of Yellowstone in 1988) to see if we could get together for lunch. But he had to leave for D.C. that day. He did share over the phone some

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reflections on the largest fire in the history of the national park that burnt nearly 800,000 acres (more than a third of the park's 2.2 million acres) for several months during the driest summer in scores of years. The fire started as a series of little fires as far away as Idaho that, thanks to fierce summer winds, conglomerated into much larger fires just south of Lake Yellowstone and to the northwest and northeast of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. It got so big that the paint of fire trucks within a hundred yards of the fire blistered and melted. When the fire threatened the famous Old Faithful Lodge, special efforts were made to preserve this grand old building by wetting down its roof and porches with torrents of pressurized water—such action did the trick. 9,000 fire fighters including the U.S Military were assigned to attempt containment of this monster fire that happens once in several hundred years. But now that eighteen months

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have passed, he said I should come up and see how the undergrowth with young saplings is coming back strong. I remembered from my ranger days that lodgepole pines have such dense pine cones that it takes a forest fire to open them up! Nature has its ways.

The day after my meetings in Cody, I decided to spend the day by going up to Yellowstone to climb Mount Washburn to have a look at all the burnt areas from this summit of 10,243 feet standing almost in the middle of the park. It took me perhaps an hour or so to enter the park and drive along the shoreline of Lake Yellowstone. I remembered years ago coming up here with Maura and the kids in early May when the lake was frozen in white ice. The steaming pools and pots of West Thumb Geyser Basin formed quite a contrast with the arctic-looking lake. But on this late June day, I turned northward on the Canyon Village Road without stopping

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to get closer views of elk herds until I arrived at Dunraven Pass just below Mount Washburn. I put on my daypack and hit the trail through un-burnt forests for a 1,200 foot vertical climb up to windswept miniature forests, all twisted and gnarled from winter winds, with tremendous views of Yellowstone spreading out all around me: Lake Yellowstone to the south, burnt forests between Canyon Village and the Norris Geyser Basin to the west and northwest with John Muir's "glad tidings" of Electric Peak in the far distance and vast burnt areas to the northeast toward the Lamar Valley. I gained a terrific view of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone by walking eastward along a narrow bare ridge. I could smell the cinders of the burnt trees from far below. I quickly descended back to my car to drive toward the Norris Geyser Basin and stop at a huge burnt area where I took a walk into the woods. Despite the rows on end of

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scorched tree trunks, it was amazing to see, less than two years after the fire, ferns and flowers blooming out of the fire-enriched soil. Here and there and almost everywhere tender lodgepole pine saplings sprung up from the seeds of pine cones opened by the intense fires. While fires cause immense destruction of trees, plants and animals, they also ultimately engender a rich, new growth. I returned to Cody and then Laramie with, I believe, a better understanding of the natural processes of our enduring planet.

Perhaps the most memorable trip was with Gordon and Jean Fader who had never been to Yellowstone—it's always fun to see fresh reactions to the magic of Yellowstone. We had reserved cabins at Canyon Village for late August and the first five days of September. After dropping off suitcases at the cabins, we took the Faders down to the Dragon's Caldron south of Canyon

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Village. They were both frightened and amused by this hissing, churning and belching and sulfurous caldron. Were we are Mars? We continued our walk along the boardwalk past bubbling mud pots and up into a meadow. But wait! What's this? About forty human beings were held up by a herd of bison blocking the way. We didn't dare walk out on the rhyolite possibly to fall through to some steam chamber. So we, along with the rest of the crowd, halted a few yards shy of defiant bison who held sway over humans for a good half hour. No other short walk we would take them on would beat the cauldron/bison trail!

That evening we wanted to catch a total eclipse of the moon by driving up to Dunraven Pass a few miles above Canyon Village. On the way up we had another surprise in store for us. A coyote trotted in the middle of the road just ahead of us. It suddenly squatted, causing us

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to stop, while it did its business and looked back at us as if to say, “the heck with you,” and trotted on into the forest. The Faders roared with laughter saying that animals sure rule the roost in Yellowstone! We parked in a lot just off the pass to see several people setting up their tripods for the lunar eclipse. We simply recorded the event on the film of our minds as the moon disappeared in the sky to leave Mount Washburn all alone in darkness. As it slowly returned, we, too, slowly returned to our cozy cabins. We four looked forward to our luncheon engagement with Bob and Carol Barbee the next day at the Theodore Roosevelt Lodge on the other side of Dunraven Pass.

We got up early to take a stroll over towards the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone where the roar of the Lower Falls could easily be heard. Jean, an artist, took many photos for later projection in her studio back home where

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she would do some painting. The canyon echoed with the sound of squawking ravens and in-between the delicate notes of the white-crowned sparrows. After a cup of coffee back at the lodge, we drove on up toward Dunraven Pass to take a nice, gentle trail (Gordon recently had knee surgery) to Cascade Lake just north of our cabins. The trail wound its way through new growth of lodgepole pine forests and open green meadows laced with light green sagebrush and bright blue larkspur flowers. Mule deer grazed in the woods as we approached the shoreline of Cascade Lake with Observation Peak rising to the north. Chickadees chirped and trout jumped in the lake. Within an hour or so we got back to the car to notice some nice picnic tables nearby—a perfect spot for our breakfast the next day. On our way up to Dunraven Pass, a *surprise* awaited us once again. This time all sorts of people stood along the road and

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pointed to something just ahead. We immediately pulled into a last parking spot and raced ahead with cameras in hand to see what the commotion was. Perhaps fifty people gathered in a circle to see a gigantic sow grizzly cross the road with three cubs following. She had to be well over 400 pounds with huge claws that clacked against the road's surface. She had, like all grizzlies, a big hump between her back and neck. She turned to growl for her cubs to follow her into a meadow just off the road. But something was wrong. She stopped, turning her head back, and growled in a high pitch. Along came a fourth cub bawling and growling at the same time to catch up with his family and sprint down the slope into a meadow away from humans perhaps to go a-berrying. Two or three grizzly cubs would be the norm, but four cubs would be highly unusual. We checked our watches and dashed for our car to make it in time to Roosevelt

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Lodge with five minutes to spare.

It felt great to introduce two of my long-time friends and their wives to each other at the “Teddy” Roosevelt Lodge. While feasting on tasty hamburgers and pickles, I asked Bob about the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone and how it was going. He said it was a bit of a long story that goes back to the 1920’s in Yellowstone when wolves were actually killed off by the park service thinking that wolves were nothing more than vermin who ruthlessly attacked elk. But over the years, elk, without any natural predators, grew and grew in number not only in Yellowstone but also south in Jackson Hole. Elk are hungry creatures and love riparian vegetation. By the 1980’s and 90’s, riverside vegetation along the Yellowstone and Lamar Rivers vanished—so too, did the small mammals and birds who once lived there. Since wolves had become an endangered species,

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between the years of 1995 and 1997, forty-one wild wolves from northern Montana and Canada were re-introduced into Yellowstone, designated as a wolf-recovery area. And not surprisingly, the wolves bred and grew in population to spread from the Lamar Valley southward into untrammelled areas. The Lamar Valley now has a thriving large pack of wolves called the “Druid Pack,” one of several packs that have established themselves not too far way. Riparian vegetation has reestablished itself well since wolves have held elk populations in check. In fact, elk herds are much healthier now with the elimination of old and sick ones that weakened the genetic pool of the herds. Birds, hares, and even fish have returned once again by willow-lined rivers. “Hey, do you guys want to see some wolves and hear them howl?” We said of course we would. Bob suggested we hang out in the Lamar Valley till dark and

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we should have success. Since they had another engagement that evening back in Bozeman, we said our goodbyes and wished the Barbees a good year ahead.

As the sun went down that evening, we saw some people a little ways up on a ridge above the Lamar River and called up to them if we could look through their telescope. They told us to come on up and have a look. Wolves can weigh up to 130 pounds and vary in color from jet black to dark tan and are three times the size of a coyote. But nary a one did we see through their scope nor did we hear any howling even after an hour's wait. So we headed back to our cabins via Dunraven Pass somewhat disappointed until, just as we gained elevation toward the pass, a large (much larger than a coyote) tan-colored wolf pranced in a meadow less than one hundred feet away, but the lighting wasn't quite good enough for photographs. As we drove toward our cabin I started to

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sing the tune “Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf, the big bad wolf,” and Maura added “of Virginia Woolf, of Virginia Woolf,” while the Faders chuckled. As the moon rose in the sky, we all decided to turn in early in order to wake up at sunrise to cook some bacon and blueberry pancakes in that picnic area we saw that morning just off the road that would lead us back to Denver. But late in the evening during our last night in Yellowstone in early September, elk (or *wapiti* in Shoshone) began to bugle in the distant forest during the very beginning of their mating season. Their bugling reminded me of the opening and closing of very rusty gates. I cannot imagine wolves trying to attack aggressive bulls with antlers lowered to the ground to scoop up and pitch a wolf thirty feet or so. It was beautiful to listen to this unique sound of the wilderness, seemingly a farewell gift to us.

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My friend Gordon and I got up early as our wives remained asleep, and we brewed up some coffee on my camp stove. It sure tasted good in that chilly September morning air.

“Do you hear the elk last night,” I asked Gordon

“Is *that* what that was?” said he as he took another swill of coffee.

At last my wife Maura came to the cabin porch and said she, too, wanted a cup of coffee. The sound of our voices talking about the old days when Gordon and I climbed Mount Katahdin in northern Maine awakened Jean, and soon we packed our car with some blueberry pancake mix, a package of bacon and my camp stove on the floor of the back seats and our suitcases in the trunk. Shortly thereafter we arrived at the Cascade Lake picnic area with all tables unoccupied. I lit up the stove and Maura mixed the batter to pour round circles on the griddle.

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With the cakes on the griddle, I couldn't help thinking of John Denver's song "Thank God I'm a Country Boy."

No sooner had the bacon started to sizzle than some people drove up to take another table. As we ate our pancakes and bacon and swilled some more piping hot coffee, about ten more cars pulled up. "Boy, I'm glad we came when we did," said I. Then a busload of people pulled up and crowded into the meadow below our table. "What's going on here?" Gordon asked. Jean suddenly shouted, "Oh, look!" And there in the meadow stood a small herd of moose, one bull, five cows and several calves all grazing on the lush grasses of the meadow graced with morning mist.

Gordon said to me, "You did it again old boy!"

"Well, the moose did, anyway," I replied.

We realized that we had a prime viewing spot to sit and enjoy a truly serendipitous breakfast just before our

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departure from the great Yellowstone National Park!

V

A Strange Switch in Early Yellowstone

(A short story)

He held up his rifle and aimed at the poacher who was about to shoot a bull elk. But he still had a difficult time saying what he was ordered to say in this situation:

“Halt in the name of the law! You’re on federal territory preserved for the American people!”

It didn’t make any sense to him having to say that. He half wished the poacher wouldn’t listen and go right on with his poaching. But this man looked mean; he looked like he was going to go right ahead and shoot that bull elk anyway, even though he was in the newly established Yellowstone National Park. Damn it, he thought to himself. The poacher is as white as I am yet here I am

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tellin' him he can't shoot what we fought the Indians to get—freedom—freedom of the wilderness.

Sam Atkins, a red-haired U.S. Cavalryman forty years of age, had been stationed at Fort Laramie twenty years earlier. He had seen action on the frontier, lots of action. He figured that he had killed over thirty-five redskins during his twelve years at Fort Laramie which had the purpose of protecting immigrants along the Oregon Trail. Those Sioux Indians were real devils from his perspective. Just why those savages didn't respect the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868, only a few years ago, he couldn't understand. So what if their so-called sacred Black Hills that they called, strangely, *Paha Sapa Wakan* had been taken away! Why shouldn't they be, if gold was discovered there. You can't tell me people have to have mountains to practice a religion. That's what churches are for! It's nothing more than pure paganism to practice

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religion in the mountains. Mountains weren't important to Christians as far as he knew.

He remembered capturing and shooting some of those Sioux devils up by Laramie Peak. His interpreter told him that one of them was called *Atanka Wakan* or Sacred Bull; he was doing some damn fool thing referred to as "crying for a vision." Sam tore down a pagan pole set up in a circle of stones near the summit of Laramie Peak. The savage had the nerve to say that this was the peoples' land and that the Army had no right to stop him from his prayers. That savage clown was stark naked with nothing more than a buffalo robe that he carried at his side. Crying for a vision, my foot! Sam remembered asking him what he saw in his vision. He was told that *Atanka Wakan* saw the morning star blink four different colors representing the four ages of man. Big deal! Only a savage mind would come up with something like that.

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When the savage refused to come with him, he shot him in the stomach and let him die in agony below his sacred circle of stones. The lodgepole pines hissed in the wind as Sam Atkins, with a few cohorts, headed back to Fort Laramie winding down a steep trail with their horses snorting and occasionally losing their footing over loose and clumpy rocks. He thought to himself that he helped protect those Oregon Trail immigrants and that one more dead Indian would make way for progress. One day the whole Dakota Territory would be civilized with decent folks in towns like Rock Springs.

But this Yellowstone poacher sure looked mean.

“Halt in the name of the law. You’re on federal land preserved for the American people!” Sam shouted again.

The poacher did nothing but take a surer aim at the bull elk standing amid alpine willows along a stream that

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flowed into beaver ponds full of rising trout creating slowly spreading circles. Sam thought of the time he rode out on the prairie with Company C back in the 1850's in the good old years just after he got stationed at Fort Laramie at the junction of the North Platte and Laramie Rivers.

Sam was riding hard kicking up lots of dust when he spotted a lone human figure high on a prairie mound fringed with light green sagebrush and sharp-pointed yucca. He told the Company he was going off to scout something suspicious looking. It wasn't long until he saw that it was a young Indian woman gathering some sort of plants—probably up to some kind of strange savagery. When she saw the cavalryman, she started running like a scared rabbit. He bravely rode up along side her and ripped off her buckskin dress leaving her naked. Sam had his fun with her all the while threatening her with a saber;

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no matter how much she screamed and shrieked, he kept on having his fun with this animal-called human. For Sam, savages had no rights as long as they remained savages and uncivilized. Boy, those were the days!

But this mean looking cuss just fired away point blank at that bull elk by gut-shooting him. Sam stared in amazement and shouted:

“I’ll have to arrest you in the name of Yellowstone National Park!” And that mean cuss just laughed at Sam—Samuel Atkins, U.S. Cavalryman and Indian fighter of ten years ago! It was too much for Sam and too confusing to be a paradox in history.

When Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, there was no such thing as a National Park Service, and so the government stationed a contingency of U.S. Cavalrymen in the Park at Mammoth Springs to protect it from poachers and miners and eventually even

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from future Vice Presidents. It was a sort of Black Hills in reverse. While some cavalymen were stationed in the Black Hills to protect gold miners from “savage Indians” of the wilderness (in violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 that honored the Black Hills as Indian Territory), he and his cohorts were stationed in the savage wilderness to protect it from white exploiters. But Sam managed to console himself with the slogan “My country, right or wrong!” The strange switch was that the country didn’t seem to know right from wrong when it what doing one thing here and quite another thing some place else.

It wasn’t confusing back at Fort Laramie in 1858. He remembered riding along with Company C. Sam carried his colors proudly. God it was good riding along chomping on a Cuban cigar and carrying the flag of his country. They waved at a passing train of Oregon

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Trailers. Sam felt great when a little blond-haired boy shouted, “Daddy, Daddy! Look! A U.S. Cavalry Unit!”

Sam reached into his pocket and gave the boy a spare brass button.

“Gee, thanks, mister! Daddy, look what the soldier gave me!”

Yes, sir, those were the days. I was respected then. Here in Yellowstone I feel like a bit of a fool. Why the heck should I be protecting the wilderness when we fought so many hard years to conquer the wilderness? Imagine protecting woods and geysers for the American people! We should develop this place and use the timber for folks settling the West. But no, he had to arrest this ornery poacher in the name of the law.

Sam Atkins always was a loner back East when he lived with his domineering farm folks in Ohio. By the time he grew his read moustache, he left his farm one

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night and headed west all by himself. As far as he could tell, his father never did try to find him. But that didn't surprise him; when he was a boy his father never had the time to talk with him and never even took him fishing. He was always out in the fields, and his mother was always in the kitchen making molasses or baking bread. The only person who talked to him was his gabbing grandfather who rambled on about how them there injuns always seemed to attack God-fearing and honest settlers back when he was a boy. What a cursed lot are those darn savages! But his parents never talked with their only son and so he left them. All they wanted to do was work that dirty old farm and nothing else. He heard of the cavalry way out west and left in 1851 with a bit of money his grandfather had given him. Once he crossed the Mississippi River at the high wooded bluffs of Prairie du Chien, he knew he was getting out to the right kind of

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country. And the rolling prairies of Nebraska did something for his soul. A few years later, after he joined the military in Kearney, he was stationed at Fort Laramie. Each time he shot at marauding Indians frightening the white settlers along the Oregon Trail, he felt powerful and significant. Yes sir, those were the days.

“I have to place you under arrest, partner. You shot an elk belonging to the American people. I have to follow my orders!”

“I am an American and that’s my elk you dumb fool,” the poacher shouted back. “This here wilderness is mine just as much as yours.”

“Well that ain’t how the law reads, but I sympathize with you, partner.”

“You sympathize! Ha, that’s a good one.”

Just then the poacher raised his rifle lightning quick and fired hitting Sam Atkins in the chest.

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“So much for your sympathy!” the poacher shouted, his face shining in the setting sun.

The land slowly darkened for Sam Atkins. He couldn't understand why a white man would shoot him, but then he didn't have much time left to think; he was aging fast. Blinking evening stars peppered the sky above and he could hear the distant roar of Yellowstone Falls. Sam tried to crawl over to his rifle that had fallen out of his hands, but he lacked the strength. He clutched a clump of sweet elk sedge in his right hand to raise himself a bit and feebly looked across at the poacher dressing out the bull elk belonging to the American people.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thoughts from Prairie Mounds

*We just looked in silence, blown by winds
In the autumn rays of a setting sun
At a rock the shape of a giant bison
Sleeping in a trance on the windy plains
high above an old Indian encampment
with scattered bones and arrowheads
under high red cliffs in a hollow
where ancient bison jumped to their death
from fear of wolf-garbed medicine man
who later celebrated by blazing fires
roasting smoking legs and flanks of bison
to the sound of thumping drums and chants
filling ancient plains with joyful festivity.*

R. Fleck, *Don't Fence Me In.*

When I first started teaching at the University of Wyoming, one of my colleagues by the name of Walter Edens asked me if I had any interest in

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searching for arrowheads. Of course I said yes, and the following weekend in late September found Walter and me tramping across the open prairie ten miles south of Laramie. We left in the early morning because the sharp angle of morning sun created shadows and light in such a way as to highlight arrow and spear points. I felt somewhat like Ellery Channing walking with Henry Thoreau who, while talking about Indians, almost immediately bent over to pick up an arrowhead beside the trail as if to illustrate that their ancient presence could still be seen and felt. Walter succeeded in finding two arrow point flakes that were by-products from the making of arrowheads. They were probably Arapaho in origin; they preferred chalcedony stone as it was both hard and readily workable. Walter asked me if I knew anything about pishkuns and whether I did or not, he would show me one of them that he discovered a few

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years earlier. A *pishkun* (a Blackfoot word), sometimes called “buffalo jump,” is a fairly high cliff where ancient tribal people (Folsom men), before the coming of the horse, isolated a few older and more weary bison from a larger herd and frightened them by wearing wolf hides and, perhaps, waving burning torches to force them into a run towards a cliff. They had no other choice but to jump to their deaths. They were finished off with arrows and spears by hunters at the base of the cliff. Then their women would proceed to dress them out and cut flank and loin steaks to be roasted on an open fire. Walter found such a site a mile or so from where we stood. And, as we walked over to it, he said what gave it away were the remains of bison ribs and hooves and horns found at the base of a cliff. Of course, he knew that he, as a mere English Professor, had to have his suppositions confirmed by a university anthropologist/archaeologist. He

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told Dr. George C. Frison about it and almost immediately the two of them went out for a look. Dr. Frison, a noted archaeologist who discovered and studied many Folsom sites in Wyoming and elsewhere, congratulated Walter on finding this site which he believed dated back a thousand years to paleo-Indian cultures. It was George Frison who proposed that the great mammoths suffered extinction *not* because they were over-hunted but because of tremendous climate change after the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago. They knew, Frison contended, that to overkill was to kill off their food source ultimately. He had discovered numerous ceremonial sites nearby the kill-sites indicating that these ancient people did not kill game willy-nilly. If they had killed off all the mammoths, why was there an extinction of shellfish and giant armored-plated armadillos as well?

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Frison explained to Walter Edens that once the mammoths had died off, descendants of Folsom man proceeded to hunt the smaller but very tasty bison. Since they had no horses until the coming of the Spanish in the 1500's, they had to hunt on foot. How? The *pishkun* was the answer. It was a special treat for me to stand atop a *pishkun* and see how the paleo-Indian hunted and survived. I would later discover that the Arapaho tribe (who hunted in these parts) made use of the bison in nearly two hundred different ways that they either contributed to or learned of from those who preceded them. The Arapaho originally came to the Great Plains from the eastern woodlands. Their language is Algonquin spoken by eastern Canadian tribal peoples. I think the poet Richard Hugo, in *Lady at Kicking Horse Reservoir* (1973), focuses very well on the nature of a *pishkun* in his poem by the same name, by juxtaposing them with

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modern-day city dumps in Montana. Though Hugo presupposes that the “Indians,” dressed as wolves, drove entire herds over a *piskun* at once, instead of isolating needed numbers of bison for the kill, this juxtaposition of two cultures hits home:

*Looking at the model of a pishkun
in the Russell Memorial Museum
you have to think converging walls of rock
back and back ten miles across the plain.
The rest is clear: blind bison driven down
the cliff by Indians disguised as wolves,
and where the bison land, braves
with arrows finishing the twitch.
All for meat and hide. High priest crying
go down buffalo and break. The herd
cracking
on the rock below. Scream and dust.
Five hundred tons of violence. Of silence.
A cry to women: bring the cleaning knives.*

Since one bison’s average weight is one ton, Hugo falsely assumes 500 bison were driven over the cliff at once to provide each tribal member with a bison a piece!

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He did not take George C. Frison's findings into consideration. Nonetheless, look at how effectively Hugo contrasts a *piskun* with the modern dump:

*South of town, in a gulch of lovely
what I guess are aspens, frames of cars
are rusting and discarded shoes discolor
blue with mold. How many hundred tons
of lovers broke that mattress soaking
in the rain a bird shakes off the leaves?
How many, starved on barren claims,
could have used the glitter of those cans?*

Waste not want not seems to be Hugo's very graphic message. Standing on the top of an ancient *pishkun* certainly gave me a perspective on those who hunted on the Laramie Plains a thousand years before the University of Wyoming existed. Men like Walter Edens and George Frison, though, have shed some bright light on ages past. Will archaeologists of the 30th century shed light on our contemporary civilization by digging through the ancient city dump outside of Laramie?

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I loved to take walks with another University of Wyoming faculty member by the name of Silvester Brito, a man of both Hispanic and Comanche origins. We walked up to the ancient tipi rings north of town (where I had taught an outdoor class on Momaday) to be startled by a herd of wild horses that seemingly came out of nowhere or, perhaps, out of the past. But what I remember most was the two of us driving toward Centennial to park by the side of the road opposite a tall, wind-blown mesa in the shape of a horseshoe or elongated C. We proceeded across open springtime prairie with pasque flowers and sand lilies blooming close to the ground. Western meadow larks sang cheerfully as well as western song sparrows. We got to the northern edge of the horseshoe formation and climbed upward to the summit of this mesa where we could clearly see the southern part of the horseshoe

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spreading eastward giving the overall appearance of a giant sand dune except it was not a sandy formation at all but stony, densely packed soil.

I had asked a university geologist about this formation, and he said it very well may have been formed by a very strong wind of over two hundred miles per hour perhaps three thousand years ago. Not only did such a wind form this giant earthen dune but also blew out softer earth eastward to form “the hollow” between Brees Field Airport and this very formation upon which Silvester and I stood. But there was something else about this horseshoe “dune.” It had the feel of an ancient amphitheatre formed by Nature but possibly utilized by paleo-Indians for ceremonial purposes a thousand or more years ago. Charles C. Mann writes in his new book *1491* (as fascinating study of the Americas before Columbus) that some c-shaped ridges fifty-five miles

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from the Ouachita Mound-Culture Site in Louisiana also have the appearance of amphitheatres. He states that the jaws of the largest one of several C-shaped mounds are nearly four thousand feet apart. Our ridge may be only a third of that size but it definitely has the appearance of an amphitheatre. At the very least, it is worth having a bit of an archaeological dig done here sometime in the near future to determine if the ancient past persists..

Silvester shouted for me to come over and see something very special. On the very top of this formation nestled behind a rounded rock lay an eagle plume in perfect shape. He said that his people, the Comanche, consider the eagle feather to have a special powerful medicine. He told me to hold the feather and feel its strength. I sensed a strong *presence* within it. Silvester said that its medicine is too powerful for a woman to hold—if they do, they will get a severe nosebleed. I

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asked him if he felt anything coming from this horseshoe mound. He remained quiet for a while and simply said that we were not the only people who came here for matters spiritual.

We returned to his home to join our wives for a special treat his wife, Carol, had prepared—piping hot antelope chili served with flour tortillas. He had also invited a Japanese exchange professor from Osaka who was also a Buddhist priest. Professor Tamai had never before eaten wild antelope meat, but he thoroughly enjoyed his dinner and asked for seconds. Silvester had several peace pipes he wanted blessed and Tamai Sensei gladly did so with a Japanese Buddhist prayer chanted in this house beneath a mesa under prairie stars.

Before we had children, Maura and I thought we should make an exploratory tour north of Laramie and into the knolls and rims of Shirley Basin back in the late

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1960's. We drove north on old U.S. 30 through the wee hamlet of Bosler (jokingly called the gateway to Laramie) and into the slightly larger town of Rock River (not to be confused with Rock Springs). We couldn't resist stopping at the Rock River Rock Shop to have a look. A young man who had graduated from college with a Bachelors Degree in geology greeted us and told us that he had recently discovered a fossil bone of a dinosaur between Como Bluffs and Rock River. He had cut it open with a bench saw to discover a beautiful interior of fossilized bone cells red and pink in color. He said he then made slices of the bone into necklace-size pieces and carefully polished them into beautiful and highly unusual pieces of jewelry. Would we like to see them, he asked. But of course, we said. And indeed they were beautiful, especially mounted in a gold-plated setting with a nice chain. We asked him how much he wanted

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for the smaller oval-shaped necklace roughly the size of a fifty-cent piece. He said would \$10 be too expensive? Not at all, we purchased it right away and Maura hung it around her neck. That was forty-five years or so ago and she still has this prairie dinosaur bone necklace! Happy with our purchase we stopped in a café across the street for a cup of coffee to relax and show off her new necklace. Shortly thereafter, we proceeded north into prairie mound country shining with brilliant stones. How could we resist? I pulled over into an old driveway and we quickly got out of the car and hiked up the highest of these mounds to be amazed by the vast array of fantastic stones all around us. They appeared to be hardened sandstone, some purple, some reddish, some tan, and some gray. It seemed like we had landed on Mars with red soil, grassless hills, and vast space. We sat down atop the mound to stare into Wyoming space. It was so

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peaceful to sit up there for a half hour or so; one could do worse than sit upon a prairie mound!

Onward we drove past Como Bluff and its vast excavation sites on the north side of the bluff where the bones of a giant stegosaurus had been discovered by university geologists. We breezed by and eventually came to Medicine Bow, Wyoming of Owen Wister fame. It was Wister's character the Virginian who said, "When you say that, smile partner!" We pulled into the Virginian Hotel parking area to have a nice hot roast beef sandwich followed with a cup of coffee and a slice of homemade wild gooseberry pie. That pie was so delicious, I can still taste it. People from all over the state of Wyoming will stop for lunch or dinner at the Virginian. It is quite possible that friends from as far apart as Cody and Laramie will meet by chance at this restaurant. An old-time professor by the name of Wilson Clough (author of

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The Necessary Earth) told me once that as he sat at the Virginian, the Governor of Wyoming came in for a political gathering at the hotel and when he spotted the professor said to him:

“Well, Wilson, what a surprise,” and the professor got up to shake hands with the Governor and sat down again to enjoy his lunch.

Then Wyoming’s lone U.S Congressman came in for coffee and said, “How are things going for you?” Wilson got up to shake hands.

Just as Wilson was about to finish his lunch one of Wyoming’s U.S. Senators stopped at his table on the way to meet the other politicians and said:

“What a pleasant surprise, Professor Clough. How much I enjoyed your classes years ago!” Wilson got up to shake hands. Meanwhile, unbelieving tourists sitting at the counter must have wondered who the heck this guy

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was sitting across from them.

The Virginian Hotel in Medicine Bow, Wyoming is indeed a crossroads for the one big neighborhood called Wyoming, the least populated state in the Union. Onward we drove on the Casper Road northward into the great Shirley Basin. Old-timers give the advice that if you are driving through the Shirley Basin in winter, you had better take along a thick horse blanket, several days of food, a can of sterno for cooking, a can of baked beans, a flashlight, and maybe even some flares. Why? If you're caught in a blizzard, it may take the state troopers a few days to find your car stuck in a snowdrift.

After we got into the basin by about forty or fifty miles, we elected to turn off the main road to follow a dirt road toward some alluring mesas in the distance with deep shadows that highlighted their many crevices. We drove for perhaps two to three miles back in before the

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road forked. In case we might lose our way back, we stopped at the fork and walked across a more desert-like prairie with sagebrush here and there until Maura noticed something—a strange elongated rock with hundreds of reddish rings at the top of it. We sat down to get a closer look. Was it petrified wood? We walked a bit farther until we started going uphill. Then we saw perhaps a dozen or more similar rocks all with internal petrified rings. It occurred to us that we had found a bit of a petrified forest! We sat down again and became aware of an intense silence so calm and still that we could hear each other's heartbeat. Here we were a mile off a nameless road forty or so miles north, northwest of Medicine Bow. There were only two other places in my lifetime where I experienced such an overwhelming silence—as the French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “Le silence des espaces eternelles m’effraye.” (The

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silence of eternal spaces frightens me). The other two places were during an evening of solo camping in the wild—the Mohave Desert of California and the other was Cameron Pass, Colorado. Maura and I were not so much frightened as we were amazed as we walked back to our car and in no rush, found our way back to Laramie by sundown.

Over the years I have tried to find this Petrified Forest again but failed completely. Was it a real place or imagined? I can see it clearly in my mind's eye even though I could never find it again. Wyoming's vast space may very well be the tip of an immense spirit-berg. But one thing for sure, Maura's dinosaur bone necklace, though of prehistoric origin, is now very much part of this life's plane of existence.

Glossary

*A Glossary of Native American Words and Expressions
used in the text.*

Arapaho/Blackeet (Algonquian language):

Boh'oonibe: mushroom or “thunder shit

Chebbeniathan: The Great Spirit

Hoowonookee: buffalo or bison

Kawuneeche: valley of the coyotes

Nestoaieux: two guides, Longs Peak and Mt. Meeker as
seen from prairies below.

Nichebechi: a place of no summer (mountains in Rocky
Mountain National Park)

Rawah: wild place, mountains in northern Colorado

Vedauwoo: earth-born spirits, a rock formation in
southern Wyoming

Blackfeet lanuage:

Pishkun: buffalo or bison jump located in numerous places in Montana and Wyoming

Lakota (Siouian language):

hambleycha: vision quest one of 7 sacred rites

Hin han kaga paha: sacred frightening owl or Harney Peak, South Dakota

Iktomi: trickster spider

mikoshala: all my relatives

Paha Sapa Wakan: The Black Hills of South Dakota

Tanka: bull buffalo or bison

Tongashala: The Great Spirit

wichasha wakan: holy man or medicine man

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Shoshone/Paiute (Uto-Aztecan language):

bozheena: buffalo or bison

Duma Upa: The Great Spirit

haihambe: raven butte (known in English as Crow Hear Butte)

pachee goyo: the bald one—title of Rupert Weeks' book

Sacajawea: one who throws the boat ashore

togwotee: arrow shooter, a mountain pass in Wyoming

udadai: warm valley

wapiti: elk

Paiute (Uto-Aztecan language):

tukunikavats: where the sun lingers, a mountain in Utah

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About the Author

Richard F. Fleck is author of numerous books that include literary essays on the American West (*Desert Rims to Mountains High*, 2013), literary criticism (*Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Native Americans*, 1985, 2015), six collections of poems that include *Mountains on My Mind*, 2013, a few novels, *Clearing of the Mist* (1979, 2000) and *Spirit Mound* (2005), and is Editor of the acclaimed *A Colorado River Reader*, 2000, *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, 1993, 1997 and Thoreau's "Indian Notebooks" (*The Indians of Thoreau*, 1974, 2007), and a writer of forewords for West Winds Press Literary Naturalist Series including John Muir's *Cruise of the Corwin*, 2014.

He was educated at Rutgers University (B.A. in French, 1959), Colorado State University (M.A. in English, 1962), and The University of New Mexico (Ph.D in English, 1970) and has taught mostly at the University of Wyoming but held visiting positions at the State University of New York at Cortland, Osaka

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University and Kobe College, Japan, and the University of Bologna, Italy.

He is married to Maura for over fifty years with three children and seven grandchildren and currently leads Sierra Club “Hike and Write” journeys in the wilds of Colorado and Wyoming.