

**FROM ICELAND TO ALASKA: OBSERVATIONS ON
TRIBAL CULTURES AND THE LAND**

Richard F. Fleck

**Online edition prepared under the auspices of the
Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, July, 2018**

Copyright Walden Woods Project, 2018

From Iceland to Alaska: Observations on Tribal Cultures and the Land

By

Richard F. Fleck



Volcanic Rift Zone in Iceland

Dedication and Acknowledgements

For my wife, children and grandchildren who are all very much a great and truly good part of my life.

Online Magazines:

Hubpages.com: “Impact of the Dawes Act.”

“Teaching Native American literature Abroad in Japan and Italy.”

Naturewriting.com: “Iceland at Last.”

“Relevance of John Muir’s *Steep Trails*.”

Print Journals:

American Ethnic Studies News and Notes: “Teaching Momaday’s *Way to Rainy Mountain*.”

Journal of American Culture: “Black Elk’s View on Nineteenth- Century American History.”

Maine Field Naturalist: “Along the Ancient Penobscot’s Coast of Maine,” Original title, “Two Little Islands.”

Quarterly West: “Field Observations on the Ancestral Pueblo Living with the Land.” (Pending)

Trumpeter: A Journal of Ecosophy: “North by Northwest to Alaska with John Muir.”

Weber Studies: “Homage to a Shoshone Elder.”

University Presses

Lake Superior State University Press, *Reaching the Nineties: The North American Experience*, ed Thomas B. Schirer, 1991: “Symbolic Landscapes in Momaday, Welch and Silko.”

Table of Contents

- I Iceland at Last**
- II Along the Ancient Penobscot's Coast of Maine**
- III Impact to the Dawes Act and a Modern Tribal Remedy**
- IV Black Elks View on 19th-Century American History**
- V Teaching Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain***
- VI Teaching Native American Literature Abroad in Japan and Italy**
- VII Symbolic Landscapes in Momaday, Welch and Silko**
- VIII Observations on Ancestral Pueblo People Living with the Land**
- IX Relevance of John Muir's *Steep Trails***
- X Homage to a Shoshone Elder**
- XI North by Northwest with John Muir**
- XII Postscript**

I**Iceland at Last***Eyjafjallajokull Volcano*

An icy giant
Volcano erupts red hot
Lava into sky.

For years, I dreamed of going to Iceland with my Irish wife sometime after my retirement from a half-century of college teaching. I dreamed of seeing the most volcanic island on our planet with all of its glaciers in-between, including Vatna Jokull, Europe's largest slow-moving ice field. Our day to fly up to Reykjavik finally came shortly after teaching my very last class.

Long before departing for Iceland from New York, I had read Nobel Laureate Halldor Laxness' superb novel *Under the Glacier*. Because I have a fascination for glaciers dating back to my ranger days in Rocky Mountain National Park, I chose this unique novel set in Snaefells, Iceland as primer

for going to the land of glaciers. Snaefells Glacier is also the setting for Jules Verne's nineteenth-century novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Within the glacier is a volcanic cone that was considered to be the entrance to the Earth as well as to the galaxies beyond. For this reason the main character of *Under the Glacier*, Jon, a Lutheran minister, no longer buries bodies in the cemetery, but has them brought in coffins to the glacier for ultimate resurrection. Perhaps he believes that because this magnificent glacier resurrects the spirit, it just might resurrect the body.

As we flew closer and closer north by east to the land of glaciers and ancient Vikings, I could not help but think about that strange novel I had read. Surely Iceland is a land of mysticism as well as glaciers and volcanoes. The most amazing thing about Iceland is *not* that ten percent of the world's volcanoes are in Iceland or that fifteen percent of Iceland is covered with glaciers, but that half the population still believes in elves like their tribal ancestors. My Irish wife (a whimsical believer in leprechauns) and I hoped to be exposed to Icelandic mythology during our week's stay in Reykjavik and environs.

I must have dozed off on the *IcelandAir* flight between Goose Bay and the Labrador Sea on the way to Narsarsuaq, Greenland and the great land mass of glacial ice some 10,000 feet thick. Perhaps next time we'll plan

on touching down at Nuuk, Greenland for an Ice Age visit. After we landed at Keflavik Airport, we boarded a bus for Reykjavik, and I couldn't help over-hearing a conversation between an old rural New England man and a young woman from Boston. The gentleman said, "I know Boston—it's a place that makes me feel claustrophobic. I'm picking up a flight out of Reykjavik bound for Isafjordur for a twenty-one day stay in this remote fishing village in the northwest corner of Iceland. I think that's my kind of place." The Boston girl responded with a "Hmm." I thought to myself that this guy has it right!

All of Iceland, except for Reykjavik, must be as isolated, thought I, as Isafjordur, This vastness of lava fields, snowy plateaus and pure white humps of endless glaciers reminded me somewhat of central Idaho in late spring, and yet, these spacious landscapes that we drove through were like none I had ever witnessed before, especially with all those endless glaciers. My God, what a marvelous place is this! After we arrived in Reykjavik at 64 degrees latitude north, both Maura and I felt a bit weary after a nighttime flight from New York. We were delighted that our hotel let us have our room at 8 a.m. as we both needed a nap before taking a whale watching cruise out of Reykjavik harbor at noon.

Well rested, we stood aboard a ship headed out of colorful Reykjavik harbor with its blue, gray, yellow and red-roofed buildings fading in the distance. Was I truly in a real world? Before proceeding far out into Faxafloi Bay, our ship slowed down near several small, treeless islands packed with bright orange-billed puffins, arctic terns, guillemots and gulls. However, whales remained our objective as we speeded up heading out to sea. We felt the sting of thirty-eight degrees as opposed to a warm and muggy New York of yesterday. The huge snowy bluffs of the Icelandic seacoast looked exactly like those described by Pierre Loti in his classic nineteenth-century novel *Iceland Fisherman (Pecheur d'Island)*. But unlike the French crew, we pursued fish and whales with cameras only. We hoped to see at least some of the twenty different species of whales off the Icelandic coast including Humpbacks, Minkes, Blues and Orcas. The captain announced over the PA that harbor porpoises could be seen surfacing at 2 o'clock off the starboard bow. They were far off, but we did see their splashes for a few seconds. Both Maura and I shivered in the cold.

We continued farther out into Faxafloi Bay with Reykjavik almost completely vanished from view. Just then, a large Minke whale surfaced a dozen yards off the portside bow to splash back under the ocean in pursuit of tiny fish and plankton. We spotted two or three more Minkes in the distance.

This whale can consume up to one ton of food per day. Fish and plankton are far more plentiful here than in tropical seas where they spend their winters. They come to Iceland with pangs of hunger, but not for too long offshore from a land where the summer sun lingers almost twenty hours per day. Since the sub-arctic sun did not do much to warm up Faxafloi Bay in mid-May, we promptly retreated to the warmth of the galley for some piping hot and flavorful Icelandic coffee. It felt so good feel the warmth of the ship's galley. We chatted with some fellow passengers who had planned to rent a car and drive completely around Iceland, but they were told not to drive too far as the roads remained icy and snow-packed a little beyond Keflavik Airport, just like winter roads in Wyoming. I wondered about the old codger from New England staying way up in Isafjordur—hope he brought some winter clothing!

Reykjavik gradually reappeared, dominated by its national cathedral high above the rest of the city of some 170,000 people or about half of Iceland's population. We could not help but notice the National Art Museum glittering with its feldspar-tinted windows that changed color every few minutes. The museum contains striking landscape paintings by contemporary Icelandic artists. Once off the boat, we soon found a nice seafood café and ate a dinner of freshly baked codfish and potatoes. I

searched the menu for ripened shark out of curiosity, but was told it is served in fancier restaurants where it is considered a delicacy. Legend has it that the first of the Vikings (tribal settlers) who landed in Iceland over 1,300 years ago were starved with hunger. They soon discovered a rotting shark on the beach. Not to be discouraged, they dug deep into the carcass to find some untainted meat. Ever since then, such aged shark meat has become a gourmet specialty. Having been lost in the Rockies for eighteen hours without food, I could well understand the Vikings' pangs of hunger. After returning to our hotel, we went to the bar to order some very tasty crowberry cordials made from sub-arctic berries found only above 60 degrees latitude north; after several of these liqueurs, we were ready for a nice night's sleep not to be deterred by a bright red northern sky shining through our bedroom windows. But we were used to such bright, nighttime skies during many Irish summers.

Iceland is situated atop the Great Atlantic Rift that is quickly (geologically speaking) dividing Iceland in half by three centimeters per year. This rift is separating the North American tectonic plate from the Eurasian plate to create powerful volcanism in Iceland with a hot spot of interior magma only 1500 meters below the surface of the earth that creates not only geysers, mud pots, cauldrons, and hot springs, but also volcanoes.

Iceland is a volcanic anomaly in Europe with as much as ten percent of our planet's volcanoes, more than any other single island.

How did all of this happen? What caused these tectonic plates to pull apart? One wild and disputed theory comes from the Russian scientist Immanuel Velikovsky in his book *Worlds in Collision* (1950) in which he contends that a huge asteroid hit the North Atlantic region at a phenomenal speed of over 17,000 miles per hour tens of millions of years ago to fracture the planet and create present-day Iceland whose hot lava rose above the sea. Such a collision would be like hitting a bowling ball with a sledge hammer to make a noticeable fracture. Other less wild theories attribute Iceland's volcanism to gradual tectonic shifts of the Earth's floating plates that ultimately resulted in serious rifts like the great east African continental rift or the upper Rio Grande Valley rift in northern New Mexico or Iceland's very own rift. If one looks at a map of the under-seas of our planet, he will see multiple fissures in the Atlantic as well as the Pacific Ocean with its rim of fire from Chile to Alaska to Japan.

Our next day was spent exploring the city of Reykjavik (the northernmost national capitol) to see the famed meeting house where Reagan and Gorbachev boldly attempted to achieve political reconciliation. We strolled past the Prime Minister's harbor-side home as well as the nearby campus of

the University of Iceland. But we couldn't wait until the next day when we would take a tour of Þingvellir National Park north of Reykjavik to witness with our own eyes the very noticeable tectonic rift within two lava walls separating bit by bit in the middle of a valley that has become the geologic border between Europe and North America. We got off the bus to take a memorable walk deep within the lava-wall rift. I tried to imagine what sounds a person camping there might hear in the calm of night. Our group emerged from this dark lava valley to walk across a river and see the spot where ancient Vikings held tribal council a thousand years ago to form an ancient government. The volcanic rift at that time would have been considerably narrower than it is today. Maura and I looked north at the magnificent, pure white Langjökull Glacier resting atop a high, gray mountain with long fingers of ice; I thought of Jon, the pastor in the novel *Under the Glacier*. Both he and his congregation believed that their glacier was more than beautiful and that "beautiful" is too cheap a descriptive term for a powerful, resurrecting glacier. Just to stand still and stare at Langjökull Glacier, north of the rift zone, certainly resurrected our spirits.

By the time we stopped at a café near the site of Gullfoss Falls, we had built up quite an appetite. It felt so good to be here in Iceland, especially with a bowl of piping hot wild mushroom soup and fresh-baked Icelandic

rolls sitting on a table before us. We spent the rest of the day climbing down to Gullfoss Falls that tumbles twice over a hundred feet each time with a loud roar, and at another stop hiking past mud pots, steaming cauldrons and Strokkur Geysir that, unlike Old Faithful Geysir, erupts every *five minutes*. For a moment or two I felt a good bit homesick for Yellowstone National Park with its bubbling mud pots where we had visited dozens of times during our Wyoming residency. Later in the afternoon we visited Iceland's geothermal plant that furnishes Reykjavik with inexpensive energy. Of course, we could not resist walking up to a very loud and rumbling bore hole outside of the geothermal power plant. Steam hissed out of this uncapped hole like Mount Vesuvius and the earth shook under our feet. Who needs coal and petroleum, I mused, when there's fire under the ground!

On another day we would take a much more intimate tour of the back-country in a jeep. Our guide took us eastward from Reykjavik to a small body of fresh water named Ponisvatn Lake lined with crowberry bushes whose berries we had tasted in a fine liqueur a few days ago. As we walked along its lava-rock shoreline, our guide explained that this very lake receded from its shores by much as three meters during the earthquake of 2006, the year of the major eruption of Eyjafjallajokull volcano that cast gray dust throughout northwestern Europe. We then drove up a high hill above

Ponisvatn into a fenced in area inside of which thousands of codfish (brought up from the nearby fishing village of Krysvik) hung on lines to dry out in the subarctic sun later to be consumed in local restaurants and farmhouse kitchens. Our guide warned us not to open windows even just a crack, or the smell would overwhelm us. On the opposite side hung hundreds of large codfish heads also drying out to be shipped to Nigeria where they would be boiled for a very strong-tasting fish soup. Glad we were not in Nigeria! Maura and I and the other family aboard the jeep all felt dumbstruck by this secretive and hidden place as though it might cast a magic spell on us. Sensing our amazement, our guide began telling a mystical story about Icelandic belief in “hidden” and very secretive people.

He told us that a fair percentage of Icelanders have had encounters with hidden people and that each one has his own unique story. “Do you have such a story,” I asked. He immediately responded that he most certainly did. He proceeded to relate his experience of going up in the mountains away from Reykjavik to his “get-away” cabin. He told us of his very enjoyable day out in Nature and his return to the cabin as the sun gradually set in the arctic sky. In the wee hours of the morning, he sensed a presence of something or someone in his room. As he gradually opened his eyes and shook his head, his eyes focused on a little boy dressed in blue. He

asked the boy who he was and what he wanted only to have the youngster vanish into thin air. These little hidden people appear and reappear here and there throughout Iceland from remote cabins to small fishing villages and even to the city of Reykjavik. They rarely speak but only stare. Who are they? What are they? I could only guess. We hoped they wouldn't come to our hotel room that night!

A bit later in the day we drove passed the humble residence of Iceland's most famous author Halldor Laxness with a clear view of many glaciers in the distance. It would have served as a great home for John Muir, America's own great conservationist, writer and, indeed, our first glaciologist. We took a very quick tour of his home called *Gljufrasteinng* (Snow Shoe) just east of Reykjavik. What impressed me the most was his cozy library and writing den with floor to ceiling shelves full of old books and new. It reminded me a good bit of John Muir's "Scribble Den" in Martinez, California. Both writers were more than passionate about ice-carved landscapes.

We were in for yet another treat on a high plateau to the east of Reykjavik. We stopped to watch the graceful gait of several Icelandic horses who trotted along remaining completely level with absolutely no rise and fall like other horses. Their floating gait is unique to Icelandic horses brought

over to Iceland by Vikings from Norway over a thousand years ago. They have gradually developed their own unique characteristics that include being multi-colored with black legs, dark brown bodies and tan heads. Our guide explained that mares can actually hold back the delivery of their foal up to two months if the weather is too severe for giving birth! We stood and stared out at the city of Reykjavik with its many multi-colored metal roofs and looked forward to enjoying a bit more crowberry liqueur in our room that night. Yes, Iceland was beginning to grow on us!

During our last day in Iceland, we decided enjoy the healthful waters of the famed Blue Lagoon. Well before our shuttle bus came, we stood in line at the hotel breakfast bar filled with the distinct and pleasant aroma of delicious coffee. Halldor Laxness writes in *Independent People* (his Nobel Prize-winning novel) that the smell of brewing coffee in a small Icelandic croft makes one forget the perversity of the world. We indulged ourselves with the extra pleasure of freshly baked, burning hot Icelandic sesame rolls laced with butter. Some forty-five minutes later our shuttle took us past miles of lava beds covered with light tan-colored moss that would turn bright green in just another month. I wished that we could stay here until that wonderful greenness would arrive.

When we came to the entrance to the Blue Lagoon, the temperature had risen to 36 degrees—a bit nippy for a swim, but certainly not too nippy for the 90 degree waters of the lagoon. Anxious to get into the water, we quickly changed into our swim suits. And oh how soothing those steaming hot waters were! The light gray-blue color of these exotic waters is attributable to some nine different volcanic minerals that include sulfur, magnesium, silicon (that creates the lagoon's white mud bottom and shoreline), calcium and sodium. I had never felt so utterly relaxed after an hour or so—far more so than any other springs we had visited back home. We couldn't believe how large the Blue Lagoon is—the size of a small lake lined with a black lava shoreline having small but much hotter alcoves. Despite the fact that Iceland is rifting apart with occasional earthquakes and eruptions of volcanoes like Eyjafjallajokull, Iceland benefits greatly by all this geothermal activity with places like the Blue Lagoon and geothermal steam heat piped in to the city of Reykjavik and environs. It was difficult to leave this lagoon, but a tasty lunch inside the resort of pasta laced with – lobster meat certainly helped. All too soon our time in Iceland came to an end.

Geological, mythical, mystical, and literary Iceland is truly a place that will linger for many a year deep within my mind and spirit.

II

Along the Early Penobscot's Coast of Maine

Distant Isle

I look eastward and spot a densely wooded
arc of land called Eagle Island in the
outer Casco Bay with a selvage of granite
cliffs fringed with boreal forest that entwines
the summer home of Admiral Robert Peary,
and for me the very sight of it evokes a sense
of polar wonder—a place that's out there
luring my spirit northward to narwhals
and Inuit villages at ocean's edge where
seal-skin kyacks weave in and out of bright
white ice floes amid very misty arctic seas.

--Richard F. Fleck

As waves pounded the rocky shoreline of Ocean Point, fog rolled in from offshore, and a mystical, distant foghorn blared through gray stillness. Ships at sea blew their horns at regular intervals in the oncoming night as nearby cottage lights cut dim patterns through the ever-thickening fog. My family and I worried over whether or not the next day would be nice to sail twenty miles out to Matinicus, one of the outermost inhabited islands off the coast of Maine.

Ten hours later at 5:00 am, the ocean had become calm and azure under a cloudless sky, and so we drove fifty miles upcoast to Rockland to board a supply ship *Mary A* through the Penobscot Bay out to our island. When we arrived at Rockland's Maine State Ferry Terminal, the tide stood at rock-bottom low, and the *Mary A* docked so far down in the water that her mast top rose up to a point equal with the level of the pier. The central Maine Coast has thirty-foot tides and if you go up to New Brunswick, Canada along the Bay of Fundy, tides can be over forty feet during a full moon.

Taking our seats at the stern of the ship, we looked up at the wharf pilings to notice countless thousands of edible mussels and brightly colored periwinkles which, if boiled, taste as sweet as a nut. It is rather mysterious why early English settlers along the seacoast of Maine starved to death for lack of food. Were they from the Midlands? How did they think tribal peoples survived? As we shall see, English and Abenakis (Penobscots) did not seem to get along too well.

At exactly 7:45 am, the *Mary A* began its slow chug out of Rockland Harbor past fisheries and moored ships and eventually past Rockland Breakwater, a half mile-long pile of huge rocks to shelter the harbor from any possible storm. A small lighthouse stood at the very end of the

breakwater. The farther we churned out to sea, the more magnificent the rugged shoreline appeared to be. The Camden Hills, rising to 1,300 feet formed the background looking somewhat Mediterranean. The last lighthouse, Owls Head, perched itself at the very top of a spruce-clad cliff. Once out at sea, ocean swells grew larger and larger giving a soothing roll to our ship. Far on the horizon ten miles closer to Nova Scotia, Matinicus appeared as a faint sliver of darkness. Though the sun felt quite warm, I could readily imagine this ship caked with ice during a winter runs with supplies and U.S. mail. To our portside, two large gray porpoises curved gracefully through the waves. Mainland seagulls followed our ship all the way from Rockland as Matinicus gradually grew in size. The clanging of a bell buoy and larger flocks of sea birds marked our progress toward Matinicus—an Abenaki word having two meanings: “a group of grassy islands” and “a flock of wild turkeys.” Indeed several small grassy islands loomed large including Wooden Ball Island. In olden times, Wooden Ball and Matinicus had a great abundance of wild turkeys.

As we pulled into the island harbor at 10:00 am, a large lobster pound shack came into view where local lobstermen store their catch. About fifteen homes surrounded the docks with backyard clotheslines loaded to the hilt with wash drying in the constant sea breezes. Most of the hundred or so

permanent residents earn their daily bread through lobstering. The docks lay covered with lobster traps and floats.

We disembarked and took a walk out of the village into the peaceful and fragrant forests of balsam fir and spruce. Among the creaking trees, there stood a historic plaque dedicated to the island's first settler, Ebenezer Hall, who, according to the plaque, was "ruthlessly killed by the Penobscot Indians in 1757." There was a good reason why, however, that one Ebenezer Hal met his fate on this peaceful island. According to the Maine Historical Society Records for 1759, Massachusetts Governor Dummer (Maine was then part of Massachusetts) signed a treaty with the Penobscot people that stated white man could settle as far as salt water flows and no farther. The offshore islands belonged to the Indians, and any Englishman or Frenchman caught on the islands was to be captured by the tribal people and brought back to white man's justice. In 1752 the Penobscot and Saint John Indians (of the Abenaki Group) complained that Ebenezer Hall and family had broken the treaty by settling on Matinicus to kill seals and wild turkeys.

Not only this, but in 1751 Hall had killed two Indians and buried them in his Matinicus garden because they were attempting to capture this white man who should not have been there in the first place. In 1753 Hall and family (a wife and stepson) were removed from the island, but they returned

within a few months. Ebenezar continued resisting the “savages” by shooting at them until he was fatally struck with a bullet in 1757. Those Matinicus turkeys really must have been tastier than any other turkey they had *ever* eaten.

Finally, as this misleading plaque states, a stubborn Ebenezar Hall indeed was killed by the Indians, but it does not state that Hall had killed one more Indian that year who, with a tribal group, was trying to capture this unlawful settler and bring him to justice on the mainland.* Instead, this “sterling” settler was killed in a provoked battle. Thankfully, today the people of Matinicus, unlike unruly Ebenezar Hall, have become “Matinicused” into living in harmony with the land having no desires whatsoever to live on the mainland. As they say to tourists, “We like our island the way it is.” One old timer said to the captain as he revved up the ship’s engine, “Ya ain’t goin’ nowhere-yer headed the wrong way!” And so, we headed back to Rockland, but not completely so.

* It should be noted that though the Penobscot Tribe eventually gave up their coastal land rights, they have recently sued the State of Maine over water rights of the Penobscot River itself along the shoreline of their current reservation on Indian Island at Old Town, Maine.

III

Impact of the Dawes Act and a Modern Tribal

Remedy

In 1868, more than a century after the Penobscot troubles in Maine, the Treaty of Fort Laramie was signed by U.S. Officials and by the tribal leaders of the Lakota Nation including Chief Red Cloud (whose image is on the Indian nickel), The treaty allowed the Lakota peoples to maintain their rights to hunt and perform spiritual ceremonies in the Black Hills of for as long as grass grows and the rivers flow. However, as we know, gold (not turkeys) was discovered in “them thar hills,” Miners came by the hundreds and not only dug mines and built roads but also constructed towns with saloons, homes and churches. Leaders like Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull decided to gather forces to retaliate with the help of other tribes.

Sadly for the Plains Indians, after the tribes of the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho defeated General George Armstrong Custer* at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in southern Montana in late June, 1876, a hundred years after the nation's founding, government troops swarmed into the area to eventually defeat the tribal people and imprison (and eventually kill) Chief Crazy Horse as well as others. The great bison herds were almost completely obliterated by soldiers and "buffalo hunters" like Buffalo Bill. By the late 1870's reservations (without bison) were created for the Lakota people including Pine Ridge, Rosebud and Standing Rock (now in the news with oil pipelines threats). Reservation lands were held communally by the tribal people allowing for some degree of freedom to roam and hunt small game but not bison.

Lakota author Joseph M. Marshall III writes in his book *To You We Shall Return* (2010) that the people of Rosebud Reservation continued, in a limited way, to roam the prairies by following a one hundred mile-stretch of the Little White River that flows through the Rosebud until it empties into the White River in south-central South Dakota. They set up camp along the shoreline for a few weeks and then moved north by ten miles or so using pony drags to carry their supplies. They would repeat this process until they reaching the borderline of the reservation and then turn around to follow the

shoreline southward. For a few years it was almost like living in the old times only without bison.

But then came along the Dawes Act of 1887 passed by the U.S. Congress. Massachusetts Senator Henry Laurens Dawes (1815-1903) supposedly had good intentions to assimilate tribal people into mainstream Americans by having them become farmers. This Act, also known as the General Allotment Act, allowed the U.S. President (Grover Cleveland) to break up reservation land which was held in common by the tribe into individual 160 acre parcels to be farmed by the Indians. Once they all became farmers, then there would be no need for the government to oversee the reservation. But the Indians did not wish to become farmers and they could not afford to buy farming implements or to pay individual taxes on these parcels.

After a census was taken, each married male was awarded a 160 acre parcel of land and each single male (not female) was awarded an 80 acre parcel to farm after they were “enrolled.” Well, as Marshall points out, the math did not work out in the Indian’s favor. After the allotment was made, it turned out that there was left over land! This left over land was then sold by the government to non-Indian farmers. Guess what happened to those

families who camped every ten miles along the Little White River in the Rosebud Reservation. “You’re crossing private property! Get off my land!”

In Henry Dawes’ intentions were good, the results of the Dawes Act were hardly good. If a family could no longer afford to pay land taxes, the parcel was sold off! Though today there still remains a tribal government, there also remains many non-Indian land holdings on a checkered reservation. On the good side, it must be said that many Indian “farmers” have managed to purchase bison to have modern-day bison ranches that sell very marketable lean and healthy bison meat to the outside world.

* In the Native American film “Smoke Signals” the Coeur d’Alene Indians of Idaho have a popular “black humor” joke about Indian fear of General George Armstrong Custer moving in to a new home on their Rez. The Indians are quite fearful that their property values will go down.

A Modern Tribal Remedy

Back in 1868 the United States Government signed a treaty at Fort Laramie in the Wyoming Territory that guaranteed the Lakota tribal ownership of the Black Hills (*Paha Sapa Wakan*) and surrounding lands with hunting rights. Signing the treaty on the government side was General William T. Sherman and on the Native side tribal elders including Red Cloud.

White gold miners repeatedly violated the treaty in search of yellow metal leading to the Black Hills War. The U.S. Government ultimately seized the Black Hills in 1877 for miners' and settlers' security in direct violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie. But good news eventually came to the Lakota people over a hundred years later in 1980 after a court case *United States v. Sioux (Lakota) Nation of Indians*. The United States Supreme Court upheld the award of \$17.5 million dollars (fair market value in 1877) along with over one hundred years of interest at 5% making the total retribution award of \$122.5 million dollars.

However, the sacred *Black Hills* were what the Indian people wanted—not raw cash. So they refused the money. The government then put this award money in an escrow account. The Lakota Nation continued to request portions of the Black Hills (The Black Hills National Forest) that were not owned by private businesses or private individuals. Five years later U.S. Senator Bill Bradley (NJ) sponsored Senate Bill 1453 to return portions of the Black Hills to the Lakota Nation. As a concerned citizen, I wrote my senator, Alan K. Simpson, in support of S. 1453. Senator Simpson promptly wrote back saying, “I do thank you for your letter regarding S. 1453, Senator Bill Bradley’s bill which would convey certain lands to the Sioux Nation. I appreciate knowing of your great interest in this proposed legislation.”

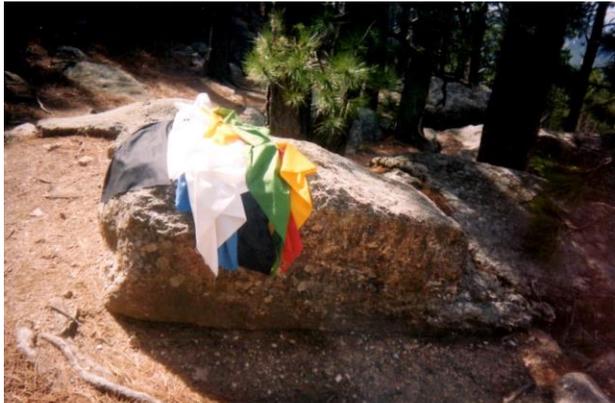
Senator Simpson went on to explain that S. 1453 has been referred to the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs. Once the committee makes its report back, he and all senators “will take a stand on the bill.” Unfortunately, the bill never got out of committee! It died there in committee chambers.

In 2004 my wife Maura and I went to the Black Hills to climb Harney Peak. It is named after General Harney who succeeded in placing all Lakota peoples on to reservations. Harney Peak should be called by its proper name *Hin Han Kaga Paha* (Sacred Scary Owl). None the less, we climbed this sacred peak in honor of the holy man of the Oglalla Sioux, Nicholas Black Elk (see his bi-autobiography, *Black Elk Speaks*) who sought visions there. Just before the summit, we came across a sacred prayer bundle made of six different colored ticking: red for the East, yellow for the South, black for the West, and white for the North, tan for the Earth and blue for the Sky. These colors represent the powers of the six directions (see accompanying photo).

There is hope in this graphic statement. Not only are prayer bundles placed throughout the Black Hills but also prayer flags of the six powers. The Black Hills are indeed sacred and are special places for tribal peoples in their seeking of visions (*hambleycha*). Can not a small portion of the Black Hills be returned in honor of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868?? Can not

the Black Elk Wilderness area of the Black Hills National Forest, at least, be returned?

A Sacred Prayer Bundle in the Black Hills



IV

Black Elk's View on 19th-Century American History

Henry David Thoreau wrote of the American Indian in his *Journal* a few years before Black Elk's birth that the historian, "though he professes more humanity than the trapper, mountain main, or gold digger," is just as inhumane to the Indian, but he uses the pen instead of the gun. Black Elk, holy man of the Oglalla Sioux (Lakota), experienced the inhumanity Thoreau refers to first hand on the Great Plains and eastward for his entire life span from the 1860's to the 1950's. It is fortunate that one white man, John G. Neihardt, wielded the pen in the Native American's favor, to tell Black Elk's story of the Lakota people the way it was told to him at Manderson, South Dakota in 1931. Black Elk sensed Neihardt would come and, when the poet eventually showed up, he implicitly trusted him. Though Neihardt romanticized somewhat the words Of Black Elk, the essential spirit

of Black Elk's story of a people is indeed faithful and fairly accurate according to scholars like Robert F. Sayre and Raymond DeMaille, who have examined the original transcripts made in Manderson.

Though such details as soldier weed (an antidote to the white soldier's fire power) and Black Elk's sense of fulfillment rather than despair are not found in the published version of *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), I will rely on this text as my source for the Native American's wielding of the pen (through Neihardt) to set the record straight. Too many American historians of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries (including Francis Parkman) assumed *a priori* that the western expansion of the United States into "Indian Territory" was sanctified by an abiding manifest destiny. Even if, thought the non-Indians, the Indian people, instead of being militant, were quaint and charming, they had to make way for the progress of an advanced civilization. Black Elk questions white man's "progress" and "advanced civilization" by giving us through Neihardt the true story of his people, their plight, and their near demise at the hands of the white man, though he is hopeful that the fourth ascent on the good red road will come sometime in the near future. The good red road, of course, refers to the road of health, strength and wholeness as opposed to the black road of war and despair.

At the outset of Black Elk's story of his people, which he recounts at age 68 when Neihardt visits him, we are given a harmonious world view of the Plains Indians before it was almost irreparably damaged by the white man: "It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit" (p.1). But this world of sharing, where even strong and able hunters must give to the weak and sick, will be disrupted by the Wasichus (they who are many) who, from Black Elk's viewpoint, abandon their disadvantaged people.

To begin with, Black Elk's father limps from a wound received at the Fetterman Battle on Peno Creek near Fort Phil Kearney in 1866 when Black Elk was three years old. As a boy Black Elk was told that "the Wasichus were coming and that they were going to take our country and rub us all out and that we should all have to die fighting." What was the reason for the Wasichus wanting to take the Lakota's country? Black Elk explains:

When I was older, I learned what fighting was about that winter (1866-67) and the next summer. Up on the Madison Fork the Wasichus had found much of the yellow metal that they worship and that makes them crazy, and they wanted to have a road up

through our country to the place where the yellow metal was [the Black Hills]; but my people did not want the road. It would scare the bison and make them go away, and it would let the other Wasichus come in like a river. They told us that they wanted only to use a little land, as much as a wagon would take between the wheels; but our people knew better. And when you look about you now, you can see what it was they wanted (p.9).

Black Elk reiterates that before the soldiers came the Lakota people were seldom hungry because humans and animals lived together like relatives. “But the Wasichus came,” Black Elk says, “and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichus; and it is dirty with lies and greed”(p.9).

The symbol of the harmony of living in the natural world is the circle (or hoop) which is like the sun and moon and earth and even a bird’s nest. The Wasichus, who had broken their circle at the close of the Middle Ages (see Marjorie Nicholson, *The Breaking of the Circle*), were intent on breaking the Lakota circle by making them live in a psychic nightmare of a square wooden-framed house instead of a tipi. The Wasichus must have been some kind of a trickster spider like iktomi in that they succeeded in

weaving “a spider web all around the Lakotas.” In fact, little children were admonished to behave well or “the Wasichus will get you” (p.13).

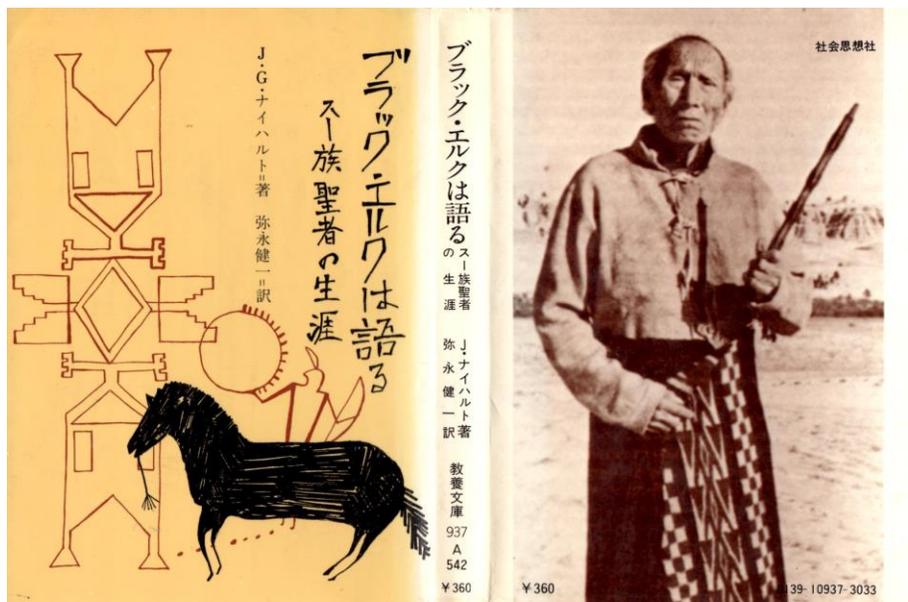


Image of Nicolas Black Elk on back cover of a Japanese edition of *Black Elk Speaks*

As Black Elk grew older he began to experience first hand the horrors of military conflict which in itself drives all people crazy as the Wasichus are driven crazy by yellow metal. Black Elk readily admits that cruelty and killing are fully human characteristics, not just the Wasichus, and once the wholesale killing began on the Great Plains in skirmishes and battles leading up to the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 (when Black Elk was 13 years old), his people, too, went crazy with killing. Indian children killed animals wantonly out of frustration; warriors ordered boys to take scalps from dying soldiers. Black Elk recalls: “There was a soldier on the ground and he was still kicking. A Lakota rode up and said to me ‘Boy, get off and scalp him.’ I got off and started to do it. He had short hair and my knife was not very sharp. He ground his teeth. Then I shot him in the forehead and got his scalp” (p. 112).

Standing Bear adds to Black Elk’s story explaining that “We were all crazy, and I will tell you something to show how crazy we were. There was a dead Indian lying there on his face, and someone said: ‘Scalp the Ree!’ A man got off and scalped him; and when they turned the dead man over, it was a Shyela—one of our friends. We were all crazy” (pp. 116-117). And Iron Hawk exclaims that “These Wasichus wanted it, and they came to get it, and we gave it to them” (p. 127).

However, the victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn was short-lived and soon all of the Lakotas, even Chief Crazy Horse, who was killed at Fort Robinson, Nebraska in 1877, eventually submitted themselves to the white man's fort and reservation. The Wasichus created for the Lakotas a system of dependency to replace the Indian's original total self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Black Elk and others believed the only way to understand the crazy mind of the Wasichus was to join them, work for them, and live among them. Ironically Black Elk and others joined, of all things, the *Buffalo Bill Show*, but in so doing, he gained further insight into the demented world (from his viewpoint) of the Wasichus where lies and greed abounded. Black Elk's spiritual vision of the good red road prevailing had to wait to be on this side of visionary time. He must first walk the black road of poverty, despair and loneliness, and no better place to see and experience this than in the white man's world itself.

When Black Elk was 20 in 1883 he remembered that the bison herds were slaughtered by the Wasichus who:

“did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal [money] that makes them crazy, and they took only the hides to sell. Sometimes they did not even take the hides, only the tongues; and I have heard that fireboats came down the Missouri River loaded with dried bison tongues. You can see that the

men who did this were crazy. Sometimes they did not even take the tongues; they just killed and killed because they liked to do that. When we hunted bison, we killed only what we needed. And when there was nothing left but heaps of bones, the Wasichus came and gathered up even the bones and sold them” (p. 213).

The concept of selling for profit replaced praying to the buffalo spirits to please make the sacrifice for human lives.

Even the open prairies became cluttered with strange gray square houses with “lines [fences] drawn to keep them in.” It became increasingly apparent to young Black Elk that “everybody was for himself” with “little rules of his own.” After Black Elk had joined the Buffalo Bill Show and had gone to New York, he began to understand why the Wasichus had no respect for the Lakota people, the land, and the sacred four-leggeds like the buffalo. Of New York, he says:

I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation’s hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother. This could not be better

than the old ways of my people. There was a prisoner's house on an island where the big water came up to the town, and we saw that one day men pointed their guns at the prisoners and made them move around like animals in a cage. This made me feel very sad, because my people too were penned up in islands, and maybe that was the way the Wasichus were going to treat them (p. 217).

The final blow to the people of the Plains came in 1890 when the soldiers fired on men, women and children killing perhaps 250 Lakotas. The U.S. Government had outlawed the Ghost Dance and when a group of Lakotas gathered to perform this dance refused to have their tipis searched for weapons, a first shot was fired that resulted in a massacre and the end of a dream, a dream of a good red road which Black Elk had seen in his vision when he was a boy of nine. However, Black Elk, according to Raymond DeMaille, in *The Sixth Grandfather*, was not a despairing old man of 68 when Neihardt visited him, but a man of hope who knew the red road would come sometime in the future for visions had to be trusted.

Vine Deloria, Jr. comments in his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks* why this book has become increasingly significant for all Americans since World War II:

Black Elk Speaks did not follow other contemporary works into

oblivion. Throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties it drew a steady and devoted readership and served as a reliable expression of the substance that undergirded Plains Indian religious beliefs. Outside the Northern Plains, the Sioux tribe, and the western mindset, there were few people who knew the book or listened to its message. But crises mounted and, as we understood the implications of future shock, the silent spring, and the greening of America, people began to search for a universal expression of the larger, more cosmic truths which industrialism and progress had ignored and overwhelmed (p. xii).

If the late Vine Deloria, who wrote the introduction in 1979, were to update his commentary say ten years later, he could add plenty of fuel to the fire: HUD scandals of the 1980's, the Savings and Loan debacle, the BCCI banking scandal, squandered relief funds for the suffering in Ethiopia and many more. Lord knows how much more Deloria could have added had he lived since the various events in 2017, a veritable black road for tribal peoples. And yet on the positive side in the relatively recent past he would have to have mentioned U.S. Senator Bill Bradley's proposal to restore lands to the Lakota people in the Black Hills, which had been unlawfully wrested from tribal jurisdiction in direct violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 signed by federal agents and Chief Red Cloud. Black Elk has indeed

spoken and, perhaps, some of us have listened despite proposed oil pipelines to be dug on sacred Lakota lands.

Reference:

Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks* with an introduction by Vine Deloria, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979, 1988, orig. copyright, 1932). All citations are from this edition.

V

Teaching N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain Under Open Prairie Skies*

N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) 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 fascinating for serious scholars, lack the vitality and forcefulness given them by the human voice; the poet's own voice is 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 overcome are self-consciousness and the

consequent instinct to interpret rather than present the work. One should aim to be the bow in the master's hand—not the master himself. Any poem worthy the name has enough intensity within itself to obviate the need for dramatization (p. 1).

Inasmuch as one of Momaday's key themes of Indian advice to the general reader that a person "ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience," I came to believe that we should do just that; we should have a group reading of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* out there on the prairies of Wyoming in order to aid the non-Indian students in appreciating Kiowa culture. The book itself is set in large part Wyoming. It is an account of the great Kiowa journey three hundred years ago from Yellowstone to the open prairies of Montana and Wyoming and down through Kansas to Rainy Mountain, Oklahoma where the tribe is presently living.

Of American Indian and ancient Greek oral traditions, the late 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 meaning." ("Regionalism as Resistance," a lecture given in Rapid City, South Dakota in 1978). 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* (shortly after he received the Pulitzer Prize in literature for his novel *House Made of Dawn*), I believed that I had to try to do justice to this humanistic epic poem in literature classes at the University of Wyoming by reading it aloud to the students stressing its rhythmic qualities (i.e., “riding horseback along the bases of the mesas and cliffs”). But unfortunately, while the students listened attentively, they did not discuss the poem or even Kiowa culture with much enthusiasm, insight, or interest.

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 I thought I would meet my class for three hours one Saturday morning in lieu of three classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for an hour each. We drove in several cars to the ancient rings and assembled in a circle around one of the rings under open prairie skies. Antelope bobbed in the distance and several hawks circled above. Our ring had a diameter of

perhaps ten yards, and we sat on the ground. I gave some background on Momaday and his power with words. For instance, I explained the opening section's unique portrayal of a hollow log (a symbol of Kiowa mythic birth origins) by replicating the sound of a hollow log through Momaday's employment of many back vowel sounds echoed in the human throat, i.e., "The Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log." And, as usual, we discussed the prologue and introduction. Then came the performance. I started the reader's circle:

*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 Kiowas 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 out*
(p. 16).

I then mentioned, "Kwuda" is a Kiowa word that describes how they *came out* of the narrow canyons of Yellowstone.

And each student continued reading aloud clockwise or sunwise around the circle. I could not help but notice that my students in the midst of open prairie, read better than any 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 this epic poem. One said, “You know that growing tree carrying the Indian child up into the sky reminds me of our own Jack in the beanstalk story. Another said, “Grandmother Spider taking care of the 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. Out on 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 each section of the poem, three historical periods—the coming 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 are four (as in the four seasons, four ages of man) as four is a more natural number than three, especially for the Kiowa people. Another young woman responded by saying that there *are* four voices, four periods in the book in that the whole of the book depicts more than the mythical past, historical heyday, and the recent past of the Palo Duro Canyon; it presents to us the eternal present as

opposed to the fixed past. A male student followed with a comment that the fourth voice might well be the internalized voice of the reader resulting from the interaction with three other voices that we all read aloud. I told the class that “sparks are flying.” Yes, we do have the three other voices represented by the myths and legends, and we do have the historical voice in the persons of George Catlin and Edward Mooney quoted by Momaday, and we clearly have the poet’s own voice represented by his personal observations from Yellowstone all the way down to Rainy Mountain. And each one of us has internalized and digested this epic journey into his own being. Many of you have spoken as a fourth voice. I decided to close by reading aloud a section of the book that depicts the essence of our own and dear Wyoming:

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 on wilderness dimension of time, as if no notion of flight could ever 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 (p. 19).

As I came to the end of my reading, we all looked out on the brownish-yellow prairie to see distant antelope under a golden sun. Is not a spiritual fourth voice evoked inside the reader or listener? Surely herein lies a manifestation of the poem's intensity, further intensified by where we sat out in the open prairies under arching, brilliant blue skies (as seen below).



References:

N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. (Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1969). All citations are from this edition.

Robert Hillyer. *First Principles of Verse*. (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1950).

VI

Teaching Native American Literature at Abroad in Japan and Italy

In 1981 I took the challenge of being the first exchange professor at the University of Wyoming to teach in Japan at Osaka University for one full year. My whole family went with me and my children were enrolled at the Canadian Academy in Kobe. Our home was in Nigawa Takarazuka-Shi halfway between Osaka and Kobe on a high hill overlooking the Inland Sea of Japan with the Rokko Mountains behind us.

I taught many different courses on American culture, but the one I remember most was Contemporary Native American Literature. Because English was a foreign language to all my students at Osaka University, I made the reading list a good bit shorter than I would have back at the University of Wyoming. My students read with care N. Scott Momaday's

Way to Rainy Mountain (1968) and *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (1974) edited by Kenneth Rosen and is a collection of contemporary short stories written by various Native American writers. Of course I gave a number of background lectures in the beginning on tribal cultures of America, their relationship to the land, the importance of oral traditions, and a synopsis of some key aspects of tribal religions.

As my students read and discussed *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, they began to appreciate the intricate relationship of the Kiowa people to the land from Montana down to Oklahoma. This relationship is not only mystical but it is also deeply mythological. The students greatly enjoyed the importance of the sun and moon to the Kiowa people as it reminded them of their own connectedness to these heavenly bodies in Japanese history, legend and myth. One Japanese critic, Hideko Takigawa, who translated this work in 1976 writes, "Their ethical sensibility toward all lives other than theirs is what lies behind their thinking and behavior." The students said as much noting the closeness of Kiowas to their horses not to mention ancient dogs (as beasts of burden), to spiders, to buffalo (bison), and to birds with whom they could communicate.

They saw similar themes in *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*. A story within the collection by the same title shows the deep respect the Pueblo

people have for their elders (a traditional value in Japanese culture). The protagonist of this story, an old shepherd, dies up in the mountains of New Mexico. It is up to the younger men to give him a proper burial and to do it with corn pollen and ancient prayers for his spirit to send rain clouds to the parched land for good corn crops to grow. My students also appreciated some of the stories such as “Kaiser and the War” for their depiction of cultural clashes between the Indian and the white man, whom the Indians called “American.” Who are the Americans, one student asked. I explained the irony of this appellation in that if anybody deserves to be called “American” it would be the first Americans, the Indians. The Pueblo people of this story know their land and know every secretive little canyon and mesa top in ways the city sheriff’s office did not. My students wondered why authorities would want to track down Kaiser (a mentally handicapped boy) to draft him into the army to fight in World War II against the Japanese. Many students wanted to know of more books to read after the class was over.

Italy

In 2005 I lectured at the University of Bologna as a “Senior Fellow” at that institution. My students knew English quite well and their reading list was a

good bit longer than in Japan. In addition to reading my own work, *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction* (1993), they read for class Louise Erdrich's *Antelope Wife*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* as well as those titles used in Japan. Some read outside of class *Lakota Woman* about Wounded Knee 1873 when people of different tribes including the Lakota Nation who seized for square miles of territory in South Dakota where they flew their own flag of the six different colors of the sacred directions (*E, S, W, N, Sky, Earth*) in order to protest policies of the Nixon administration that were hurtful toward tribal peoples including the slashing of health care funds provided by the Johnson administration.

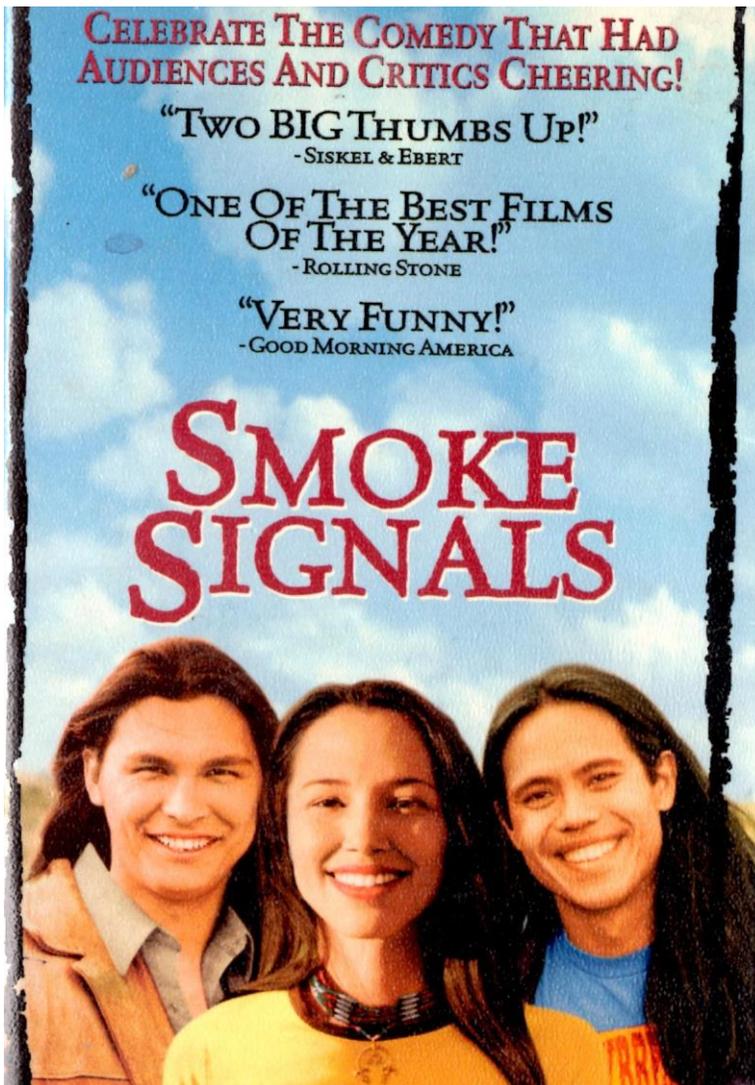
Some of my students were on exchange from the University of Heidleberg, Germany who had read all of Erdrich's novels *auf Deutsch*. They mentioned to me that one of the reasons German people are enticed with American Indian cultures is because their bad treatment by the U.S. Government gives them a sense of reprieve over guilt feelings about the Nazi regime. My German, Italian and Spanish students were also very appreciative of American tribal spirituality and their stewardship of the land and with ancestral traditions passed along through living oral traditions. Perhaps the most telling thing about foreign reaction to Native American

literature is the tremendous amount of it that has been translated into all major European languages as well as Japanese.

To finish my University of Bologna class I showed two contemporary Native American movies: *Thunderheart* and *Smoke Signals*. The first film centers on a part-Indian FBI agent who comes to investigate crime on the Pine Ridge Reservation but who ultimately finds that the crime is being committed against the Lakota people by uranium mining interests. The part-Indian agent played by Val Kilmer winds up defending his Indian people against the feds. His FBI boss admonishes him with the words, “Don’t go native on me!” The second film (completely native-directed, native acted and based on Native American novelist Sherman Alexie’s *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, 1993) is a sad but humorous depiction of two Coeur d’Alene Indians traveling to Arizona to get ashes of the protagonist’s late father who had lived in a trailer with his new girlfriend out in the desert. The boys are to return the father’s ashes to the Spokane River back up north. On the bus down to Arizona, filled with white folk, the two Indian discuss the films starring John Wayne who, for some reason, never shows his teeth. They make up a song about John Wayne’s teeth to the dismay of their fellow travelers. My students didn’t seem to catch the irony. But a humorous line at the beginning of the movie *did* get great laughter from my Italian audience

was a reservation radio broadcaster's greeting to listeners, "It's a beautiful day here at the Coeur d'Alene Reservation and a great day to be aboriginal."

All the students at Bologna remarked on similar themes found in literature that resonated in the films: cultural clash, reverence for the land, and carrying on with ancestral tradition. May I add, ironic and sardonic humor?



VII

Symbolic Landscapes in Writings of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch and Leslie Silko

*It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell.
And of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds
And the wings of the air and all green things; for these are
Children of one mother and their father is one Spirit.*

--Black Elk Speaks

Black Elk, the holy man of the Oglalla Sioux, speaks for the land and all living things upon it as being interrelated with Tongashala or the Great Spirit as their father and Earth Mother who is, of course, one mother of all living things. Such a traditional world view was not only held dear by most old-time Native American peoples from the Southwest to the Northeast, but is

also strongly expressed in the writings of contemporary Native Americans including N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko. Our Earth Mother is not only spiritually alive and sacred, but she also speaks to those who will watch and listen.

For purposes of this essay, I should like to confine my commentary primarily to N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and Leslie Silko's germinal essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination" (1987). Some references will be made to other works of these three Native American authors in specific regard to sacred land in contemporary life.

As Matthias Schubnell points out in his study on Momaday, two key events in the Kiowa author's life spurred him to writing *The Way to Rainy Mountain*: his first visit ever to the sacred Tai-me bundle in 1963 with his father Al and his grandmother Aho. Schubnell writes:

Momaday, in keeping with tradition, had to make an offering of cloth and was then allowed into the presence of Tai-me. It was hanging from a small forked tree in a closet-like recess of a room. Momaday experienced 'one of the most intensely religious feelings' he had ever known, the certainty of being in the presence of a sacred object (p. 142).

The second event occurred shortly after his visit to the Tai-me bundle when his grandmother Aho died. As he visited her grave at Rainy Mountain cemetery along with the graves of his other ancestors, he felt an urgency to establish a bond with them and their common Kiowa culture. The Way to Rainy Mountain establishes this bond and certainly the sacred land is very much part of this bond. Momaday felt the presence of his grandmother's spirit in her house and he sensed that she spoke to him requested that he tell the story of his people.

He also includes memories of his grandfather's wonder at living creatures of the Oklahoma plains:

He had always wondered how it is that the mound of earth which a mole makes around the opening of its burrow is so fine. It is nearly as fine as powder, and it seems almost to have been sifted. One day Mammedaty [his grandfather] was sitting quietly when a mole came out of the earth. Its cheeks were puffed out as if it had been a squirrel packing nuts. It looked all around for a moment, then blew the fine dark powder out of its mouth. And this it did again and again, until there was a ring of black, powdery earth on the ground. That was a strange and meaningful thing to see. It meant that Mammedaty had

got possession of a powerful medicine (p. 73).

This little mole gives Mammedaty powerful medicine because it has transformed Mother Earth from one beauty to another kind of beauty—a ring of powdery earth. In beauty it is finished. From the large orb of the planet comes little powdery rings of the same substance. Herein lies a powerful spiritual unity.

Human earthen shelters also conform to the land—storm cellars. Momaday recalls “low earthen mounds with heavy wooden trap doors that appear to open upon the underworld.” He writes:

I have seen the wind drive the rain so hard that a grown man could not open the door against it, and once, descending into that place, I saw the whole land at night become visible and blue and phosphorescent in a flash of lightning (p. 49).

The Tornado, according to traditional Kiowa belief, was made of the clay of Mother Earth by human hands into a writhing horse which rose up into the sky at first frightening all who beheld it. “But they speak to it, saying ‘Pass over me’ (p. 48). They are not afraid of **Man-ka-ih**, for it understands their language.” With this mythological story Momaday further reinforces the belief expressed by Black Elk of all things being related with one mother and one father who is Spirit. That spirit is felt in the presence of

the Tai-me which originally appeared to the Kiowas as a creature with “the feet of a deer, and its body was covered with feathers” (p. 36). It was this creature who provided food for the hungry Kiowa tribe, and it was in the spiritual presence of this sacred creature that Momaday sensed “a great holiness about in the room” (p. 37).

Perhaps everyone, whether or not we are Kiowa, can learn much from the land and its sacred beings. Momaday admonishes the individual “to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth.” There,

He ought to 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 (p. 83).

Such an admonition is heeded and graphically illustrated by Momaday’s own fictional character, the Priest of the Sun, in his novel *The House Made of Dawn* (1968). The Priest of the Sun not only concentrates upon the remembered earth but also re-creates in his own mind and in the

minds of his listeners the moment of planetary creation when “It was dark, and there was nothing. There were no mountains, no trees, no rocks, no rivers. There was nothing. But there was darkness all around, and in the darkness something happened. **“Something happened”** (p. 85). That something was the sound of the Word, the word of the Spirit, the creator, the unifier. There are numerous other passages one could point to in Momaday’s *Rainy Mountain* including ambling antelope in their “own wilderness dimension of time,” and primordial dogs dreamed into being, but let us turn to the sacred landscapes in the writings of James Welch.

Before turning to Welch’s novel *Winter in the Blood*, I would like to linger a bit with one particular poem “Thanksgiving at Snake Butte” from his collection *Riding the Earthboy 40*, first published in 1971. The poem, which here follows, elicits a bond with Welch’s Blackfeet ancestors through Montana’s spiritual landscape:

*I time we rode that trail
up the butte as far as time
would let us. The answer to our time
lay hidden in the long grasses
on the top. Antelope scattered*

*through the rocks before us, clattered
unseen down the easy slope to the west.
Our horses balked, stiff legged,
their nostrils flared at something unseen
gliding smoothly through bush away.*

*On top, our horses broke, loped through
a small stand of stunted pine, then jotted
to a nervous walk. Before us lay
that smooth stones of our ancestors, the fish,
the lizard, snake and bent-kneed*

*bowman—etched by something crude,
by a wandering race, driven by their names
for time; its winds, its rain, its snow
and the cold moon tugging at the crude figures
in this, the season of their loss (p. 40).*

The persona of this poem experiences, through Montana butte country, a sense of the past fused with the present which temporarily holds his ancestors (depicted in petroglyphs on the rock) in check; that is, though

nature is ever-present (snakes gliding smoothly in the bush and snakes carved into petroglyphs), his ancestors (the bowman on bent knee) are seemingly lost to the present age, but the present age, however, is only a season in time. Nature, then, enables the persona to transcend the time of his own limited season by exposing him to the very snakes that the ancient bowmen encountered hundreds of years ago. In a sense, both Momaday (Kiowa) and Welch (Blackfeet-Gros Ventre) return full circle to sacred ancestral experience through their contact with Earth Mother, whether in Oklahoma or Montana.

Turning to Welch's novel, *Winter in the Blood* (which more aptly relates to our topic than *The Death of James Loney* or *Fools Crow*), we can clearly see the extreme importance of the land, of Montana's earth and sacred animals, to the modern day Blackfeet-Gros Ventre protagonist. While he must confront the western world of run-down towns, hookers, white fugitives from the law, his run-away Cree girlfriend, and barroom violence, the nameless protagonist is able to rediscover his sacred ancestral roots through the open, rolling prairies with meadow larks and the scent of sagebrush, through his memories of his deceased brother and father, through his pipe-smoking ancient grandmother, and most importantly through an old man called Yellow Calf who turns out to be his grandfather.

First let us look briefly at the role of nature in the novel. It gently counterbalances run-down towns and barroom scenes. The protagonist, son of First Raise and Teresa, and grandson of Yellow Calf (Gros Ventre), and his grandmother (widow of a Blackfeet chieftain), lives on a ranch in the Blackfeet Reservation where, “the yard was patched with weeds and foxtail, and sagebrush beyond the fence.” As he walks through his yard, “The earth crumbled into powder under my feet; beneath the sun which settled into afternoon heat over the slough, two pin tail ducks beat frantically above the cottonwoods and out of sight. As I lowered the bucket into the cistern, a meadowlark sang from the shade behind the house” (p. 4). Such a sense is in contrast to the towns nearby where he pursues his run-away girlfriend and runs into the “airplane man,” a fugitive from the FBI. A pervasive checker-work of town and country is skillfully woven throughout the novel. As the critic Charles Larson points out, there is “a sharp dichotomy between life on and off the reservation (p. 149). Memories of his deceased father and brother also serve as a strong natural tie with the protagonist’s tribal heritage and the mystical land.

First Raise, his father, and Mose, his brother, as well as his grandmother, widow of Chief Standing Bear, are all of great significance to the protagonist. Though the father was never around very much, he was,

nonetheless, memorable for his storytelling which made even the white man laugh. He died young, though, with winter in his blood, frozen to death in a barrow pit beside the road. The father did, at least, break in his two sons to ranching. The boys had to search for stray cattle in the far reaches of the backcountry of the reservation where, in autumn, “the sky cleared off, revealing stars that did not give off light, so that one looked at them with the feeling that he might not be seeing them, but rather some obscure points of white that defied distance were both years and inches from his nose” (p. 104). As young ranch hands Mose and his brother gained a feeling for the land, and such a feeling would compel the surviving brother to return again and again after numerous forays into white man’s world. Unfortunately, Mose died while trying to herd cattle into a corral; such a death made ranch life a formidable reality for the surviving brother who suffered a knee injury at the time of his brother’s death.

Old grandma, who detested her grandson’s Cree girlfriend, was a living link to the Blackfeet past; she was the young widow of Standing Bear, a chief before the days of the reservation. Her biography links directly with a proud Blackfeet history before the coming of white man. It was a young Yellow Calf, a Gros Ventre, who took pity on the widow and cared and provided for her and eventually fathered her daughter Teresa.

Yellow Calf is to this reader the most important link to the narrator's past, to the earthy, and to the spirit world. Yellow Calf is as ancient as the hills; he leads a life of nineteenth-century simplicity amid the confusing and barren twentieth century. In no way is the old man lonely (though his true identity remains mysterious until almost the end of the novel), for he can communicate with nature. The narrator and hero of the novel asks Yellow Calf:

"How is it you say you are only half death, Yellow Calf, yet you move like a ghost. How can I be sure you aren't all the way dead and are only playing games?"

"Could I be a ghost and suck the blood of cattle at the same time?" He settled back on the cot, his lips thinned into what could have been a smile.

"No, I suppose not. But I can't help feel there's something wrong with you. No man should live alone."

"Who's alone? The deer come—in the evenings—they come to feed on the other side of the ditch. I can hear them when they whistle, I whistle back."

"And do they understand you?" I said this mockingly. His eyes were hidden in the darkness.

“Mostly—I can understand them.”

“What do they talk about?”

“It’s difficult...About ordinary things, but some of them are hard to understand.”

“But do they talk about the weather?”

“No, no, not that. They leave that to man.” He sucked his lips. “No, they seem to talk about...” –he searched the room with a peculiar alertness—“Well, about days gone by. They talk a lot about that. They are not happy” (pp. 67-68).

Yellow Calf is in direct opposition to the barroom men whose talk is cheap. His talk with the creatures of Earth Mother is meaningful and lasting. He cannot be lonely even though he lives by himself because he is surrounded by nature. The town drunk is lonely because he is surrounded by uncaring townsfolk who are preoccupied with themselves. Yellow Calf is, in short, the narrator’s link with a sacred land alive with spiritual realities.

Leslie Silko’s essays and fiction concern themselves directly with the spiritual realities of the Pueblo people linked inexorably with the deserts and snowy mountains of New Mexico. In her relatively recent essay, *Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination*, she explains:

The antelope merely consents to return home with the hunter. All phases of the hunt are conducted with love. The love of the hunter and the people have for the Antelope People. And the love of the antelope who agree to give up their meat and blood so that human beings will not starve. Waste of meat or even the thoughtless handling of bones cooked bare will offend the antelope spirits. Next year the hunter will vainly search the dry plains for antelope. Thus it is necessary to return carefully the bones and hair, and the stalks and leaves to the earth who first created them. The spirits remain close by. They do not leave us.

The dead become dust, and in this becoming they are once more joined with the Mother. The ancient Pueblo people called the earth the "Mother Creator" of all things in this world. Her sister, the Corn Mother occasionally merges with her because all succulent green life rises out of the depths of the earth.

Rocks and clay are part of the Mother. They emerge in various forms, But at some time before, they were smaller particles or great boulders. At a later time they may again become what they once were. Dust. A rock shares this fate with us and with animals and plants as well. A rock has being or spirit, although we may not understand it. The spirit

may differ from the spirit we know in animals or plants or in ourselves. In the end we all originate from the depths of the earth. Perhaps this is how all beings share in the spirit of the Creator. We do not know (p. 84).

As Silko explains, it is the tradition of the oral narrative which teaches the Pueblo people their world view wherein spirit is inextricably fused with matter whether rock or bones or hair. The Earth Mother is alive with spirit and paradoxically humans return to this spirit as dust. Rocks and humans, then, are related in spirit and in story, and the landscapes of New Mexico reinforce this continuity with their mystical forms and shapes. Animals as well are part of this spiritual chain; the antelope and the badger, according to ancient Pueblo tradition, helped humans emerge into this, the Fifth World. When a Pueblo Indian beholds a desert landscape, according to Silko, he not only sees mesas and buttes with lizards and snakes, he **becomes** the land as the land becomes him.

Charles Larson insightfully contends that Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony* "embodies a number of mythic overtones: a venture into the unknown (war), a descent into the underworld (madness), and a ritual cleansing or purification." He adds that "The narrative structure is elliptical, developed through flashbacks and spatial juxtaposition, abrupt changes in

time and point of view” (p 150). The protagonist, Tayo, a half-blood who returns from the horrors of war, must find himself again; he must rediscover his purpose as a Pueblo cattle rancher. But before he can do that, he must rid himself of the poison and insanity of World War II in which his half brother Rocky dies.

As in other fiction, poetry, and non-fiction we have seen, the sacred land plays a significant role in *Ceremony*. After Tayo agrees to see a Navajo medicine man by the name of Betonnie, and after the medicine man had questioned him thoroughly to determine the root cause of his war sickness, they both travel off to the sacred Chuska Mountains where:

The plateaus and canyons spread below...like clouds falling into each other past the horizon. The world below was distant and small; it was dwarfed by a sky so blue and vast the clouds were lost in it. Far into the south there were smoky blue ridges of the mountain haze at Zuni...This was the highest point on the earth: he could feel it. It had nothing to do with measurements or height. It was a special place. He was smiling. He felt strong (p. 146).

Here at the spiritually highest point on earth, old Betonnie made a sacred sand painting with a dark [black] mountain range, a blue range, a yellow range, and a white range representing the four holy directions. Just

after the curative painting was completed, Betonnie—as quick as lightning—cut Tayo’s scalp with a dark piece of very sharp flintstone. While this ceremony did not cure Tayo overnight, the power of the real and symbolic mountains set in slowly and gradually to restore Tayo’s balance and harmony which exists so eminently in the natural world.

Nature, the sacred Earth Mother, figures prominently in contemporary Native American literature:

*It is a story of all life that is holy and is good to tell,
and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds
and thw wings of the air and all green things; for these are
children of one mother and their father is one Spirit.*

--*Black Elk Speaks* (p. 1).

References: (all citations come from these individually identified titles in the my essay)

- Charles Larson, *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1978.
- N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- _____, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969
- Mathias Schubnell, *N.Scott Monday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Leslie M. Silko, *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977.
- _____, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” *Nature*, ed. D. Halpern. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987.

Welch, James, *Riding Earthboy 40*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
_____, *Winter in the Blood*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

VIII

FIELD OBSERVATIONS ON ANCESTRAL PUEBLO PEOPLE: LIVING WITH THE LAND

The life style of the Ancestral Pueblos (800-1300 AD) of living close to the land, of utilizing Nature's resources in a non-aggressive way, of receiving spiritual guidance from shamans in ceremonial kivas, and of listening closely to their own inner spirit nurtured over the centuries to share their bounty with those in need, has a great deal of significance for contemporary Americans who must deal with an increasingly aggressive mindset in the midst of a technocratic society. From living in pit houses up to 800 AD or so to their time in cliff dwellings to 1300 AD, these ancestral people developed a strong sense of community where specific and individual skills were shared for the greater good. One person might be able to design and create baskets much better than he could hunt. Another person might be a stone

mason at heart and not a good nurturer of crops. Sharing was a matter of spirit and necessity.

It is true that life in a cliff dwelling was hardly utopian. Cliff-side living, in ancient times, in what is today the Four-Corners region of the American Southwest, could be harsh during times of drought, and fierce during winter blizzards, and nearly impossible in times of sickness and injury. And it could be more than difficult trying to carry a deer carcass down slim moki steps on a steep cliff. And one can only imagine the piercing pain of a toothache after eating too much corn bread laced with sandstone chips coming from corn-grinding stones.

On the other hand, what a great sense of peace these people had standing and staring at a golden sunset lighting up fields of mature corn, or of the great joy drinking a hot bowl of sweetened corn gruel under winter a moon that lights up white and red sandstone cliffs just beyond magnificent cliff dwellings like Cliff Palace or Keet Seel or Betatakin. Their ingenuity of adapting to harsh conditions of desert-canyon living must be appreciated by all who come to visit these sites in the Four Corners area. The ancient ones had a special sense of intimacy with the land that, in many ways, is in lacking in contemporary society.

Of course, the average life span of the Ancestral Pueblo people was twenty-five or thirty years shorter than ours, but is it not the *quality* of existence far more important than the length of time spent on our planet? Surely their life style of living with the land is something that we can learn from and appreciate. Their imaginative response to living in canyon country, at the very least, can stimulate our own responses to our own particular environment.

Rural Ancestral Sites in the Grand Gulch of Utah

Deep in the Grand Gulch of southeastern Utah within its main valley, the Kane Gulch, lie several small, rural Ancestral Pueblo family ruins (as opposed to larger urban clusters of ruins in Mesa Verde) that include the Turkey Pen Ruins (inhabited between 1100-1270 AD). They rest within the curvature of a cliff hollow above a valley filled with golden holy-grape flowers that smell like honey and attract many colorful hummingbirds. Western meadow larks translate the highs and lows of surrounding rock walls with commensurate notes. Desert varnish stains drizzle over most of Grand Gulch's cliffs with dark iron oxides leached out of the rock by rain and wind.

What did these ancient people feed on eight hundred years ago? Corn for sure. Turkeys? They most certainly penned wild turkeys in willow cages more for their feathers (used for sleeping mats) and for eggs than for meat. Other food sources consisted of beans and squash, not to mention pinyon nuts and wild strawberries. They hunted desert bighorn sheep, deer, and rabbits as the bones of these animals have been found in their ancient trash heaps or “middens.” Life was not easy as they grew their crops on top of the mesas and had to climb up and down moki steps carved into the sandstone cliffs. They grew hungry from working hard in topside fields and building additional living quarters, grain storage rooms and ceremonial kivas for worship

Grand Gulch is full of miniature cliff dwellings of non-human origin made by scores of cliff swallows. Did these bird homes or even hornet nests inspire the Ancestral Pueblo people to do the same? Modern-day Native Americans tell us that each animal has something to teach human beings. Spiders weave, coyotes cautiously look over their shoulders, hummingbirds cross-fertilize squash blossoms, and owls hunt by night when small animals are active. But why did the late Basket-makers, their ancestors, descend from the mesa top pit-houses down into hollows of cliffs to build new homes? Surely it is cooler down below and it is more defensible as well. But many

ancient Pueblo people had very bad falls while coming down moki steps with heavy bundles of corn or fresh deer meat.

Turkey Pen Ruins, named after its turkey pens made from closely woven willow branches, is in a truly lushly vegetated valley that rests under a huge curving arch of sandstone. These cliffs echo a nighttime chorus of frogs, owls and jays that could be the source of a belief in *chindi* spirits who guard both cliff dwellers and cliff dwellings and are said to be present to this day. It is bad luck to remove a piece of pottery from the Grand Gulch or elsewhere because, according to legend, “the chindi spirits will get you.”

Throughout these ruins the visitor can see many pictographs, not only of turkeys, but also images of a more of a supernatural order. Up above the ruins are a series of winged people with tiny fingers coming out of the tips of their wings. In fact, these bat-like creatures constitute a fair percentage of the rock art at Turkey Pen. Above these creatures there are even more mysterious white thimble painted in a square pattern. Directly below the thimble people are eight slanting lines, a bat person, and two crescent-moons with horns facing skyward. Whatever they are, they can give the modern visitor “the willies” under a nighttime moon.

The masonry of the Turkey Pen Ruins, just above the wooden pens, is intricate. Rough sandstone slabs are mortared together with mud and small

stone chips for leveling. The interior ceilings of the living quarters are truly, like the masonry, a work of art. Large pine logs jut out of the exterior walls and serve as the main support for the ceiling. Tightly woven willow branches, covered with a coat of adobe plaster, form the interior ceiling. It is not difficult to imagine groups of people telling stories inside one of these intricately made rooms before they stretch out on a turkey feather mat to go to sleep. Their amplified voices, under a giant stone arch, could have easily blended with the sounds of insects and birds in the hollow below; indeed time and space seem to blend together at Turkey Pen Ruins making the here, there and the there, here.

All through these small ruins of the Grand Gulch lie countless scores of well-preserved “Anasazi” corn cobs as well as many chindi-protected shards of black and white pottery that was used to store hot coals for lighting a fire on a deer-hunting and pine-nut gathering trip. The making of pottery as opposed to reed baskets is a distinguishing feature of the Ancestral Pueblo people over 700 years ago. Interestingly, transitional baskets with clay bottoms have been found in the Mesa Verde area.

A second site in the Grand Gulch, called Split Level Ruins, is approximately seven miles downstream. It, too, is deep within a sandstone

arch that rises above dense stands of 800 years old juniper whose berries were used to flavor corn bread and corn mush. Descendants of bats, wrens, owls, serpents, and even firecracker penstemon (that formed part of the ancestral community) still remain and strongly hint at the presence of the ancient ones themselves. Certainly the pictographs and petroglyphs assist the modern visitor in sensing a lingering presence of ancient spirits.

Split Level Ruin is a marvelously preserved piece of architecture in two levels with perfect willow-branch ceilings and firmly mortared walls housing numerous chambers. Any and every breeze coming from the valley below and cliffs above, created perfect summer air conditioning. In winter these sandstone slabs absorbed sunrays and held them through the night to furnish these ancient ones with indirect solar warmth. The acoustics up here amplified nature's perpetual concert of frogs, birds, crickets, wind in the willows, or even a creeping enemy tribe. With such acoustics, a modern person, sitting and listening to canyon sounds inside a kiva, may find himself suddenly ducking at the swoosh of raven's wings a thousand feet above.

The Kiva of this ruin is a central and circular ceremonial chamber with a small fireplace and a smoke hole. The original structure was covered with a plastered ceiling of willow branches and had raised wooden planks on

the earthen floor for the medicine man to make the sound of a drum with his stomping feet. All the while he may have chanted the story of creation or led his people in prayer while pointing toward a deep hole or sipapu in the earthen floor to remind his people of the spiritual entrance into Mother Earth. All human souls entered this world through the sipapu and returned to Mother Earth after life's end into the sipapu. Modern day Hopi visitors explain that the kiva's sipapu symbolizes the grand sipapu (Shibapu) in the mouth of the Little Colorado River just before it joins the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.

Some of the living quarters within the Split Level Ruin, both upper and lower, still have dark smoke stains on the masonry from cooking. The visitor can readily smell smoke as though it were only yesterday that people baked their corn bread on an open fire. Just outside the living quarters, pottery fragments lay scattered on the ground, some red, some black, some white. The Ancestral Pueblo people or cliff dwellers made great use of clay pots for transporting steaming hot things that baskets could not. To make this pottery, they burnt juniper branches and possibly even turkey dung in sandstone ovens to bake and harden the clay vessels with unique designs of black lizards or even zigzagging lightning bolts gliding across white space of clay.

Yet another significant archeological site in Grand Gulch lies above the Kane Gulch in a side valley called Bullet Canyon. It has the appropriate name of the “Perfect Kiva” approximately eight miles southward from Split Level Ruin. The trail up Bullet Canyon rises at a steep angle past the Jail House Ruins with wooden bars in its windows. From camp just before nightfall, the visitor can explore the Perfect Kiva site with a flashlight in hand by walking across a level terrace with adobe buildings high above the more desert-like Bullet Canyon. The walls of the ruin are laced with eerie, supernatural petroglyphs of eerie figures with antennae.

A nighttime descent down a ladder into the Perfect Kiva is somewhat like entering the Earth’s very core before the time of Columbus and into mythological time itself. Contemporary Pueblo people tell us the creation story of when humans first emerged from a lower spirit world onto the surface of the Earth. The kiva is symbolic of that ancient lower spirit world. It is truly a spiritual clearing house for Ancestral Pueblo people as well as modern-day Pueblo people. If the today’s visitor descends the ladder at nighttime into the Perfect Kiva, perhaps he just might sense streams of spirits coming and going. Anyone alive in bodily flesh would have to be reminded of the transience of human existence, especially as sandstone cliffs

slowly darken at moonset. All earthly, material concerns are put into perspective deep inside a kiva.

Many have conjectured about the activities of the ancient ones in a pre-Columbian kiva. One Park Ranger Archeologist at Mesa Verde back in the 1960's suggested that the priest or shaman preached on the necessity of having a sense of true care and concern for the entire tribe. Greed has no place. Each person must attempt to maintain a balance with the land. Without prayer, who can assume the sun will rise, clouds will form, and rain will fall?

A Hopi visitor to the Lowry Pueblo north of Cortez, Colorado in Cross Canyon noted that the kiva served a social function as well. He noted that the Lowry Pueblo's giant kiva had two opposing stone benches where summer people and winter people sat facing each other. The summer people told stories about warmth, flowers, thunderstorms and bees during the height of winter storms. The winter people told stories, during the heat of July, of the strength and endurance that is required during a bitter cold January or February. This Hopi elder explained that these opposing stories told during opposite seasons helped the people maintain a spiritual balance.

The Ancestral Pueblos, who thrived between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, lived in numerous locations throughout the American Southwest

in addition to the Grand Gulch and Mesa Verde. These other locations include Chaco Canyon, Chimney Rock, Bandelier, Hovenweep, Canyon de Chelley, Betatakin and Keet Seel just to mention a few that will be discussed later. They all had one thing in common: *corn*. Corn was grown on the mesa tops, in moist canyon seeps, and even right underneath the cliff dwellings or close to earlier pit houses. “Anasazi” corn was much smaller than our corn of today, but it, along with beans and squash, was highly nutritious. From seeds of ancient corn, experimental fields have been successfully planted in Mesa Verde National Park to grow knee-high by the fourth of July. In August, the ancient ones gathered fresh corn to be roasted in fire pits or baked in outdoor ovens or stewed in boiling water. The first-picked corn was dumped into earthen pits with hot embers and sealed over with earth and reeds to steam all day long. At feast time, they opened the corn pits and hot steaming corn on the cob was served to one and all. After the first feast of summer, women shucked and ground roasted corn kernels into a fine meal with stone manos in stone metates. Unfortunately the meal contained bits of sandstone which wore away the teeth of the ancient ones. They stored this fine meal in granaries for winter use when it was made into corn mush or a thin gruel that was served as a hot drink to ward off the cold and dampness of the cliff dwellings.

In autumn they stored corn on the cob in large storage chambers and later ground it into a fine paste to be baked as corn bread sometimes mixed with pine nuts and or juniper berries (gathered in October) and served with roasted deer or bighorn sheep steaks. Of course, not all years were plentiful, and sometimes severe droughts lasted several years or more. Accordingly, the ancient ones never assumed that corn would grow in abundance year after year. Ancestral Pueblo priests conducted ceremonies in kivas for corn to be successfully planted, grown and harvested. An ear of corn was offered in six directions: North, West, South, East, Skyward and Earthward. It is no small coincidence that corn grew in six different colors, each color representing a sacred direction: Yellow corn came as a gift from the North and blue, from the West. Red corn came from the South, white from the East and speckled corn from the Sky and black corn from the Earth itself.

If sufficient rain did not fall on the growing crops, or unusually cold weather remained through the summer months, human beings were out of balance with Nature. It was up to the priests to restore that balance. However, if bad weather persisted year after year, people could no longer trust their priests and sometimes rebellions would occur. Such was the case, some archeologists speculate, at Chaco Canyon when severe droughts persisted for

ten years and longer. But sooner or later normal weather patterns would ultimately return, too late for those who passed on.

Urban Anasazi Sites

The green table lands of Southwestern Colorado and high desert of northern New Mexico served as an “urban” homeland for six hundred years for Ancestral Pueblo people at Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, two of the most studied sites in the American Southwest. Mesa Verde is a magical place with dwellings atop and down under, some housing up to one hundred people (as opposed to as few as ten or twelve people in rural sites). Mesa Verde is a place where pinyon jays screech among the scrub oak and pinyon pine forests and where Colorado Hairstreak butterflies flutter among the purple columbine and red Indian paintbrush blossoms.

At Montezuma Pass, the visitor can see into each of the four-corner states and Sleeping Ute Mountain, a formation in the shape of an Indian chief lying on the ground with the prominent features of a forehead, nose, hands crossed on his chest and legs that stretch along the Colorado-Arizona border. Modern day Pueblo Indians have a legend that this sleeping figure gathers rain clouds and spreads them outward to water the crops. Perhaps this same story was told by the Ancestral Pueblos and passed on through the generations as with Leslie M. Silko's short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." To the South one can easily spot Shiprock, New Mexico, and, as Navajo legend has it, this giant rock formation served as an air ship that transported the early Navajo to this region.

Summer evenings are a special time at Mesa Verde. Thunderheads usually build up in July and August and are quickly illuminated by flashes of lightning making them look like giant Chinese lanterns. The novelist Willa Cather spent many months in the Desert Southwest and wrote two charming novels set in New Mexico and Colorado: *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *The Professor's House* (1925). In "Tom Outland's Story" of *The Professor's House*, she describes the thunder beings of Mesa Verde:

“I’ve never heard thunder so loud as it was there. The cliffs threw it back at us, and we thought the mesa itself, though it seemed so solid, must be full of deep canyons and caverns, to account for the prolonged growl and rumble that followed every crash of thunder. After the burst in the sky was over, the mesa went on sounding like a drum” (p. 193).

One of the most interesting surface structures at Mesa Verde is the Sun Temple, so called because of a sandstone sun dial in the courtyard which measured the movement of the sun by day as well as by season. It provided the Ancestral Pueblo people with corn planting times that would be frost free or how much longer the cold, windy, stormy winter would last. Winter was the season of harsh endurance, so harsh that the old and the sick had a high frequency of death. Some speculate that it was a season of witchcraft.

To the side of the Sun Temple’s courtyard chipped, into the wall is something phenomenal-- a petroglyph that portrays a swirling and exploding star. According to ethno-historian Marta Zulauf, this petroglyph represents the super nova that exploded millions of years ago but finally became visible to earthlings in the year 1066 AD, the same year as the Battle of Hastings when the Normans invaded England. This petroglyph possesses a special

energy of its own as it gives the observer a sense of a perpetual swirling motion. Did this event augur some sort of omen for the people of Mesa Verde of bad times in the future? True enough, serious droughts two hundred years later would drive them away from Mesa Verde forever.

The single most famous ruin in the entire American Southwest is The Cliff Palace of Mesa Verde with square and round towers, circular kivas and countless scores of dwellings. They were built with beautifully regular slabs of sandstone cemented and plastered with red clay mortar and constructed with ceiling logs of juniper jutting out of the top of the walls. It contains 217 rooms and **23** kivas! It housed up to 200 people making it one of America's oldest cities built 750 years ago. Though it could have housed permanently far more people, it is theorized by modern archaeologists that Cliff Palace provided temporary housing for visitors who came from afar to trade or to participate in ceremonies (much like Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon). What a sight Cliff Palace must have been for Charles Mason and Richard Wetherill back in 1888 when they stumbled across these ageless dwellings. Don Watson, in *The Indians of Mesa Verde* (1961), writes:

“For almost seven centuries it [Cliff Palace] has stood there looking across the canyon toward the setting sun. Proudly, almost haughtily, it has resisted

the heavy tread of those slow centuries. Like a giant with a shawl of everlasting stone pulled closely about its shoulders it has stood with unbowed head, an eternal monument to the intelligence and industry of its builders” (p.3).

The visitor can readily imagine ancient ones gathering fresh corn to be carried down toe and hand holds to the city below where children gathered freshly laid turkey eggs from the pens adjacent to their dwellings and women busily ground corn kernels into a fine powder for making bread. Perhaps a hunting party with domestic dogs also descended the cliffs with several deer carcasses. The Cliff House must have bustled with activities during most of the time except during the windy blizzards of January when people huddled around a blazing fire.

The growing of the corn was not only intricate but ingenious. The Ancestral Pueblo used a technique that the Papago Indians of southern Arizona use to this day according to Gary Paul Nabhan in his informative book, *The Desert Smells like Rain* (1982). They made use of desert seeps of water trickling out of higher ground. Mesa Verde itself lies at a down-sloping angle of several hundred vertical feet from the northern to the southern end. Instead of letting the water seep off the southern rim into

canyons endlessly until it evaporates, the inhabitants of Mesa Verde built a series of retainer walls along the course of the seeping water to create fields of corn that received irrigation naturally from the force of gravity. Not only did they plant corn here but also squash and melons. In numerous places where streams trickled through fields after summer thunder storms, they planted corn, squash and beans intermixed. These three sister plants protected each other by providing minerals to the soil and by having the prickly vines of squash plants defend this community of plants from harmful insects. Such a system prevailed through the Desert Southwest from Mesa Verde to Hovenweep to Keet Seel.

Contemporary archaeologists conjecture that the Cliff Palace inhabitants may have passed fresh corn grain down from the fields to the dwelling below by means of long, woven yucca fiber ropes holding large clay pots to be grabbed by the people below. In this way they eliminated so much cargo being hand carried down tricky moki steps. Perhaps other objects like small game and fresh berries were also delivered in this fashion. Instead of carrying heavy water down moki steps, they collected rainfall in large clay-pot cisterns just outside their dwellings.

Balcony House Ruin (so-called because of a mortared plank was constructed just below higher dwelling doorways) is perhaps the most

defensive fort-like structure in the entire Southwest. In order for the modern visitor to get to this ruin, he must ascend a thirty-two foot wooden ladder and creep through a narrow passageway just as wide as the average person's shoulders and finally emerge into the courtyard of the Balcony House perched some 700 feet above Soda Canyon. Why on earth would one build a dwelling place with smoke houses for curing meat in such a difficult and remote area? Imagine trying to lug a dead deer on your shoulders up moki steps (no wooden ladders) to the Balcony House! Did they build such a place out of fear of something? Three triangular petroglyphs remain to this day carved in a wall just outside of the living area. Did they represent a constant prayer to the Great Spirit for protection against some sort of enemy like invading nomads? And yet there are no signs of any type of warfare. Or was it fear of something even greater? Up in the Balcony House nestled deep within an over-hanging cliff, these ancestral people could not have lived any closer to the land than here.

The pueblos of Chaco Canyon due south of Mesa Verde in the New Mexican dry canyon country also had many unique features of living with the land. The Chacoans thrived for some four hundred years with ample crops of corn, squash, beans and melons grown in the valley floor. However, it must be noted that, as the pre-pueblo people constructed surface dwellings,

they gradually denuded the mesa tops of necessary timber for ceilings of multi-chambered dwellings. In so doing, they unwittingly lowered the water table over the course of centuries and created their own man-made drought.

Neil Merton Judd has written an exhaustive study on Chacoan masonic structure entitled *The Architecture of Pueblo Bonito* (1964). There are many fantastic sites in Chaco Canyon (including Chetro Ketl, Pueblo del Arroyo, Casa Rinconada and Alta Pueblo), but surely Pueblo Bonito has attracted more archeological attention than any others and for good reason. Pueblo Bonito took longer to build than our nation is old, over 300 years. The Masonic structure of this pueblo is incredible considering it was created between 850 and 1250 AD. It has three storey-high walls constructed with tight-fitting sandstone pieces that needed no mortar. They were leveled or balanced with smaller stone chips. As mentioned earlier, the supporting beams of pine wood were obtained from the mesa tops for 300 years. Only during the last twenty years or so of the thirteenth century did their living conditions become unbearable, forcing them to desert the area for the moister, richer Rio Grande Valley.

Contemporary archaeologists believe that even though Pueblo Bonito had over 600 rooms and thirty-two kivas, three of them being gigantic, its population remained relatively small mainly because the site served inter-

tribal ceremonial purposes. Most of the living quarters quite possibly were used only temporarily by visiting groups during high ceremonies. Countless thousands of ancient ones visited Pueblo Bonito via great trade roads coming from the four cardinal directions that can be seen clearly from atop the mesa at the Alta Pueblo site. Pueblo Bonito, along with many other dwellings in Chaco Canyon, is on a solar and lunar alignment readily observable during the solstices in December and June.

Not only did ancient ones come to visit with the 6,000 Chacoans for ceremonial purposes, but they also came from afar to trade. Recent chemical analyses of cylindrical jars found in Pueblo Bonito have shown traces of cacao brought up from Mexico! Hot chocolate drinks must have been enjoyed for both ceremonial and social purposes. New Mexican turquoise as well as corn powder and corn grain and possibly desert herbs were traded for cacao as well as Macaw feathers employed in ceremonial dance. Sea shells, sea coral and even copper bells were found at Chacoan sites. The ancient ones used shell trumpets from the Pacific shoreline as drinking vessels. Trade, then, was widespread between north and south and east and west between 800 and 1280 at Chaco Canyon.

Chacoans themselves had their own trade colony 90 miles north at Chimney Rock, Colorado between what is today Durango and Pagosa

Springs. Chimney Rock is at an elevation over 8,000 feet in a montane zone of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir (some 2,000 feet higher than Chaco Canyon). The colony was established around 1100 AD. It is comprised of numerous ceremonial kivas, and just below the Chimney Rock cliffs there is a large pueblo structure having the same Masonic features as the Pueblo Bonito. It, too, had a ceremonial and trade function to house visitors from the South.

The question is why would a higher more northern colony, with a growing season of only ninety days, be of value to Chaco Canyon and, of course, vice versa. Surely any corn crops grown at 8,000 feet elevation would be inferior to crops grown in a warm and sunny desert canyon. So what could be of value to Chacoans from the much higher frosty forests of southern Colorado? In the first place, many medicinal herbs thrived in high forests that did not grow in the desert. Such herbal plants as arnica (whose oils are still used today to relieve the pain of rheumatism), *ephedra* (or Mormon tea) to treat allergies and breathing problems and sagebrush tea to relieve stomach cramps. Besides herbs, thick and oozing sap from the ponderosa pine tree healed wounds and cuts. Its tasty inner bark served as candy. Dried chokecherries were another source of a sweet/sour treat. All of these things were traded for corn grain and dried squash, scarce commodities

at Chimney Rock. Additionally, elk jerky and hides from Chimney Rock were traded for desert turquoise as jewelry and powder. Turquoise powder served as a spiritual power base upon which sandstone pueblos were built. This powder, incidentally, has been found at the bottom of the stone walls of Pueblo Bonito and other Chaco sites. Essentially turquoise powder fostered “spiritual engineering.” Spruce branches, used in ceremonial dances, were traded for Macaw feathers (from Mexico) and for desert clays and minerals to make pottery. These are just a few examples of trade that existed between Chaco and Chimney Rock and that took place for, perhaps, two hundred years.

How did Chacoans and the people of Chimney Rock know when the trading for various items would take place? There are a number of high mesas between Chimney Rock and Chaco Canyon, a distance of ninety miles. According to the rangers at Chimney Rock, high school girls from Durango, Colorado conducted a science class experiment just a few years ago at Chimney Rock and at a mesa some thirty miles away. They both had pieces of reflecting glass, and at a given time starting reflecting the sun toward each other. They jumped for joy when they could see each other’s glass very clearly. In their conclusion they wrote that fire signals could

easily have been seen over a series of mesas between Chimney Rock and Chaco Canyon's highest pueblo, Alta Pueblo.

Different smoke signals could easily have been sent to signify which items were needed. For instance, white smoke, made from burning dead branches of dried sagebrush or juniper, could have meant that Chimney Rock needed more corn grain (one puff at a time), squash and melon, two puffs at a time and so forth. Mountain herbs needed by Chacoans could have been signaled for by burning green branches and shrubs to produce black smoke, say one puff at a time for healing herbs and two puffs at a time for wild teas and so forth. Runners from Chaco Canyon might meet runners from Chimney Rock half way (forty-five miles) where an exchange of, say, turquoise powder and elk jerky would have been made.

Chaco Canyon in turn traded materials like turquoise for ornamental sea shells with Pacific Coast tribes and desert minerals for staining pottery for ceremonial Macaw feathers with Mexican rain-forest tribes. In other words, the Ancestral Pueblo people traded needed materials throughout a vast area of the American Southwest and the Mexican tropics and even the Pacific Seacoast. They were far from being sedentary farmers who stuck to themselves. Pueblo Bonito and the mountain- high community of Chimney Rock served as hotels for many ceremonial and trading visitors. All of these

aspects help define an “urban” environment as opposed to the more rural and much more self-reliant communities in Grand Gulch.

Keet Seel, Betatakin, and Hovenweep Communities

Keet Seel is one of the most difficult sites to reach, especially since the hiker has to carry enough water for the two-day round trip trek of eighteen miles that requires one to cross and re-cross a stream perhaps fifty times to reach this destination. As Reg Saner states in his book **Reaching Keet Seel** (1998), what he remembers most about Keet Seel is getting there. True enough, but once the visitor arrives, he will be astounded by one of the best preserved Ancestral Pueblo sites of all. It was occupied between 950 and 1300 AD when that same regional severe drought forced these people to evacuate.

Keet Seel is located in a remote northern section of Navajo National Monument, Arizona at an elevation of 6,400 feet and due south of Kayenta. It has an appropriate Navajo name—Keet Seel—or “broken pottery.” Many colorful shards of pottery lay scattered around the base of the cliff hollow

that houses this ruin. Though it is hardly a ruin as many of the 150 rooms within the structure remain in remarkably good condition, and the outer walls are lined with 800 year-old pots and jugs.

The original moki steps that lead up the cliffside are still visible, but modern visitors must climb a seventy foot ladder that follows the contour of sandstone. Once up here, the visitor can enter several of the well-preserved rooms with strong ceiling logs that are bound together with yucca fiber and ingeniously reinforced with sharp turkey feather quills.

Kivas lay outside the dwellings along with storage pits and grinding stones that are still in tact as well as the stone grinding basins. The smell of smoke on the cliff ceilings remains quite strong 700 years later. Keet Seel housed over 100 people whose life style was essentially the same as the people of Grand Gulch, Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon. Keet Seel was indeed like a small city all by its lonesome self with nearby springs and a fertile valley floor for growing the “three-sister” crops. Beyond the fields grew gambel oaks, box elders, rabbit brush and a variety of wild flowers. Wildlife included mountain lions, elk, deer and trilling canyon wrens. Additionally, to this day, there is an abundance of pinyon pine and oak trees that provided nuts and acorns to supplement the diet of these ancient ones.

At nighttime these people had a full view of the moon, planets, stars and Milky Way (known to modern-day Pueblo Indians as “The Way of Souls”). On chilly mornings Keet Seel remained high above the mist of Keet Seel Creek, and once the sun rose, it warmed up the south-facing sandstone dwellings that retained the sun’s heat until late in the evening. What could have been better for the thirteenth-century American than to stand and stare at the canyon below with a hot mug of wild herbal tea along with a crust of fresh-baked corn bread?

The Betatakin (rhymes with Vatican) ruins are also in Navajo National Monument, but they are much closer in to modern roads than Keet Seel, being only a six mile round trip hike (with a required guide). The Navajo name “Betatakin” translates to “House Built on a Ledge,” and that it is. Betatakin is situated on a ledge in a perfect “Hollywood Bowl” composed of orange-colored sandstone that rises high above a densely vegetated valley floor now thick with oaks and aspen and Douglas fir trees. Surely these people utilized this forest land for its herbs and many edible plants making for a veritable sense of self-reliance. Canyon wrens trill constantly as if to represent spirits of the past.

Betatakin is the only Ancestral Puebloan site having a square kiva. It has only this one kiva as opposed to thirty-two at Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde!

Perhaps the whole valley, in a way, served as a grand kiva in which the lessons of the natural world could be readily observed and appreciated. In this stream-fed “grand kiva,” the Great Spirit provided them with supplemental food including wild mushrooms and puff balls, wild onions, *ephedra* tea, wild tomatoes, and water cress. The valley produced fresh and cooling breezes, by day, and at night night, a pleasant chorus of birds and frogs.

The Betatakin cliff dwelling was inhabited for only fifty years, perhaps one human life-time. Why only fifty years? Was it because of an oncoming drought? Did enemies frighten them away (though there is no sign of warfare)? Or was it news that came from afar that new settlements had been made at such places as Shongopovi with an even richer volcanic soil for crops? Or was it simply the universal need for change? Whatever the reason, inhabitants at Betatakin enjoyed fifty years of simplistic and natural comfort that is more and more difficult to find in our modern society.

High atop Cajon Mesa, Utah, in the San Juan Basin and within fifty miles or so of Mesa Verde, lies the towers and pueblo castles of Hovenweep just above seeps, once dammed for irrigation of crops. This community thrived between 900 and 1270 AD at an elevation of 6,800 feet with deeper valleys stretching southward. In these valleys and on mesa tops, the people

of Hovenweep cultivated corn, squash, beans, and one other important crop, *cotton*. The Mesa Verde natives did not grow cotton, but they wore clothing made from cotton. It is quite probable that they traded with Hovenweep inhabitants things like their long yucca-fiber ropes for highly desired cotton as they were almost neighbors. It is increasingly apparent that Pre-Puebloan trade was quite extensive and varied.

Archaeologists have determined that the 2,000 residents of Hovenweep, during the Pueblo Period, lived in large dwellings like the twin towers, but periodically left these dwellings to mingle with the natural environment more closely in much smaller dwellings, and, after a generation or so, they would return to the larger living quarters. One such more remote residence is the Boulder House. It consists of a small set of rooms for living and for grinding corn tucked right under a very large boulder. There could be no better example of living with the land than the Boulder House! A modern parallel of leaving the security of solid structures to live more simply might be seen in urban inhabitants bursting out of their city to go camping in the Pocono Mountains or the Catskills. According to Ian Thompson, in *The Towers of Hovenweep* (2004), the inhabitants lived in a desert wilderness consisting of three circles of life: the inner circle marked by human dwellings and cultivated crops, the middle circle defined by wild

animals and plants, and the outer circle, characterized by mountains and deserts ultimately traversed by their ancestors who would settle at Hovenweep within sight of Sleeping Ute Mountain (p. 26).

Thompson quotes Joe S. Sando, a contemporary Jemez Pueblo Indian scholar, who explains the importance of ancestral acknowledgement of the significance of migration through uninhabitable lands:

“The people came ...to their present areas of residence, from the place of origin at Shibapu (sipapu), where they emerged from the underworld by way of a lake ...And with them came the Great Spirit, and He guided the ancient ones through the many arduous tasks of daily life. For unknown ages the ancient people were led from place to place ... [and] many of them finally settled in the Four Corners area” (p. 1).

Where Did They All Go?

There are many threads running through the woven tapestry of ancestral migration after 1300 AD from Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, Chimney Rock,

Hovenweep, Betatakin, Keet Seel, the cliff dwellings of Grand Gulch and many more. Theories of the 1960's and 70's contend that the people of Mesa Verde left for Chaco Canyon in scattered waves, and they left Chaco Canyon for Bandelier north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Spanish came in the 1500's to break apart Bandelier into little villages (los pueblos) up and down the Rio Grande Valley. Their evidence was pottery. Mesa Verde pottery shards have been found in Chaco Canyon and in Bandelier. Perhaps there is some truth to this thread, but it wouldn't explain the migration of *all* Mesa Verdeans and other northern settlements such as those in the Hovenweep and Cross Canyon areas.

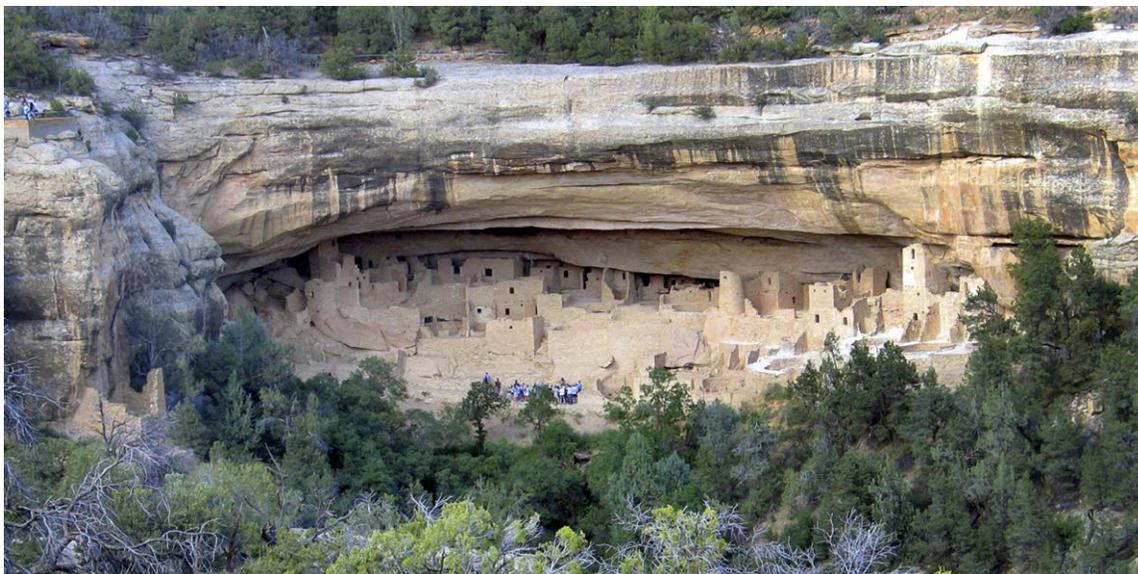
Theories of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries suggest that some of the Rio Grande Valley settlements were pre-Spanish; that is, news spread by the grapevine that these Rio Grande settlements had a *constant* and not variable water supply and that the riparian soils were mineral-rich for crop production. Even cotton could be grown. The severe drought of the late thirteenth century proved to be a motivating factor for wave-like migrations southward to a land of greater promise.

Another thread of this sun-drenched weave comes from the modern-day Pueblo people themselves. Many are the visitors and interpretive rangers in the national parks and monuments of the Four Corners area who are from

the Hopi, Zuni, and Rio Grande Pueblo settlements themselves. They have drawn upon age-old oral traditions of their own origins of coming from cliff dwellings and mesa-top pit-houses. In other words, the ancient ones migrated south to Zuni and Hopi lands, not to mention to such places as Acoma (Sky City) and Laguna Pueblo.

Why did the ancient ones never return to the grandeur of Keet Seel or Cliff Palace or Pueblo Bonito? The early twentieth-century author Thomas Wolfe wrote a great novel entitled *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). He hit upon a philosophical truism that universally reflects human nature.

Something there is that resists re-living the past and that fosters the spirit of moving forward to meet the future. Once we are ready to leave, we become like drifting clouds across a desert sky, eventually to rain down on a spot that was once dry.



Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado



Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon National Monument, New Mexico

References

- Willa Cather, "Tom Outland's Story," in *The Professor's House* (New York, 1925)
- Neil Merton Judd, *The Architecture of Pueblo Bonito* (Washington, D.C., 1961)
- Susan Lamb, "Sandstone Ladder in the Sky," in *Mesa Verde National Park*, (Mariposa, CA., 1999).
- Baker H. Morrow and V.B. Price, *Anasazi Architecture* (Albuquerque, 1997)
- Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, (1982)
- Reg Saner, *Reaching Keet Seel*, (Albuquerque, 1998)
- David E. Stuart, *The Ancient Southwest*, (Albuquerque, 2009)
- Ian Thompson, *The Towers of Hovenweep*, (Moab, 2004)
- Don Watson, *The Indians of Mesa Verde*, (1961)
- Marta Zulauf. *Through the Sipapu: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Mesa Verde Anasazi*. Houston: University of Houston doctoral thesis, 1982
- Zwinger, Ann, *Wind in the Rock*, (Tucson, 1993)

Park Rangers Consulted:

- Lauren Black at Chaco Canyon National Monument. 2011
- Sharon Curry at Mesa Verde National Park, 2011
- Jeffery Meyer, Mesa Verde National Park, 2011
- Rudolfo Sanchez, Chimney Rock Archaeological Area, 2010
- Patrick Joshevama, Navajo National Monument, 2010

IX

Relevance of John Muir's *Steep Trails*

“There stood Mount Hood in all the glory of the alpenglow, looming immensely high, beaming with intelligence, and so impressive that one was overawed as if suddenly brought before some superior being newly arrived from the sky.”

--John Muir, *Steep Trails*

John Muir (1838-1914) was clearly ahead of his own times as a conservationist, defender of the Wild, and very effective pleader for its preservation. Thankfully, he served as an important influence on U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt who helped create more national monuments and parks than any other President. But it is to his writings that we must turn,

most especially *Steep Trails*, collected and edited by Frederic Bade in 1918 four years after Muir's death. Bade collected essays for *Steep Trails* that are, indeed, surprisingly relevant for the twenty first-century reader.

Steep Trails concentrates on Muir's experiences from the 1875 to 1902 in the states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Oregon, and Washington from the time he wrote his early work "Studies in the Sierra" for *The Overland Monthly* to his being an established writer at the turn of the century after the publication of *The Mountains of California* in 1894. The essays in *Steep Trails* can be characterized in many ways that include his innovative geological envisioning of landscapes millions of years ago (reminding us of our contemporary writer John McPhee), his exciting accounts of sheer adventure and joy of being in wild places, even in the strong surf of the Great Salt Lake during a spring storm, and his astute observations on tribal cultures of the Pacific Northwest.

John Muir's literary style contains not only richly descriptive imagery, but also deft narrations of river networks from high peaks down to the sea as well as rivers of mountainside ice joining together to form a vast *mer de glace*. His writing includes commentary on the nineteenth-century destruction of a pre-existing harmonies and balances found in dense forests of sugar pines, Douglas firs, Sitka spruces and wolves and elk in Oregon and

Washington, by examining frontier society in fur trapping and in lumber camps of Washington, in the mining towns of Nevada, and farming communities and small cities in Utah and Oregon.

In “Shasta Rambles” Muir encounters the strange and somewhat uncanny landscapes of the Lassen Peak lava beds. He describes how the Modoc Indians effectively blended into these lava beds for defense against the blue-coat soldiers who were dumbfounded by their enemy that seemingly became the black lava rocks themselves. Muir’s depiction of the Modocs holding their own in their lava beds puts to mind Leslie Marmon Silko’s essay “Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination.” She contends that when the Pueblo Indian looks at the landscape of New Mexico, he *becomes* that very landscape.

John Muir, unlike State Geologist Josiah Whitney, was able to sense what Yosemite looked like during the last Ice Age. In “A Geologist’s Winter Walk,” he envisions Tenaya Canyon as a “*mer de glace* [that] was not less than two miles broad, late in the glacier epoch, when all the principal dividing crests were bare; and its depth was not less than fifteen hundred feet. Ice-streams from Mounts Lyell and Dana, and all the mountains between, and from the nearer Cathedral Peak, flowed hither, welded into one, and worked together” (p. 26). In another chapter “Glacial Phenomena in

Nevada,” he envisions the entire basin and range terrain of that state as being originally filled with carving ice between each lens-shaped range of mountains. When the ice eventually melted, huge lakes formed that much later evaporated into sagebrush basins. In “Summer Days on Mount Shasta” Muir envisions the deposition of porous lava gravel and sand on Mount Shasta’s base happening after an eruption suddenly occurred several centuries ago that quickly melted Shasta’s glaciers causing floods of water to wash down porous gravel to the valleys below.

Fire and ice are important to Muir’s belief in Nature’s essential harmony even in what most people would consider destructive like volcanoes, earthquakes and crushing walls of ice. In “Summer Days at Mount Shasta he contends: “Thus, by forces seemingly antagonistic and destructive, Nature accomplishes her beneficent designs—now a flood of fire, now a flood of ice, now a flood of water; and again in the fullness of time an outburst of organic life—forest and garden, with all their wealth of fruit and flowers” (p. 36). In his chapter “A Great Storm in Utah,” he doesn’t see Nature as being “wrathful” but rather as “beauteous” cloud formations that crown and wreath the Wasatch Mountains.

Even though the young Scotsman endured a perilous night on Shasta’s summit (14,179 feet) in May, 1875 where he and his climbing companion

Jerome Fay experienced the freezing cold of a fierce blizzard and the roasting, sulfurous heat of a volcanic steam vent to keep one side of them warm for a few minutes before they began to roast, Muir felt that this episode was altogether glorious when the snow blossoms cleared away to reveal a nighttime sky of brilliant stars. On another occasion he hiked and camped in the forbidding San Gabriel Mountains (from the chapter of that name) laced with thick and pointy chaparral that forced him, in one instance, to crawl on his hands and knees in Edward Abbey fashion, through thick briar. He managed to reach the summit of the San Gabriels to stand and stare in wonder: “From the summit of the eastern rim I had a glorious view of the valley out to the ocean, which would require a whole book for its description” (p. 153). One of his most famous mountaineering episodes is recorded in “An Ascent of Mount Rainier.” In August of 1888, Muir and fellow climbers, including the artist William Keith, ascended to 14,410 feet (Muir’s highest ever) for sheer adventure. In this case, unlike the fierce time atop Mount Shasta, he was rewarded with an extremely fine view of the Cascade Mountains that could “hardly be surpassed in sublimity and grandeur.” This physically challenging experience of climbing up a live, steaming volcano was exactly what his wife Louie wanted for her husband who seemed to be wearied by months on end of supervising the packing and

shipping of fruit from their ranch in Martinez, California. Live volcanoes or not, Nature maintains a steady balance and harmony.

By far the most destructive force in the wilderness of the American West was the human being himself, particularly the European-American who was always on the lookout for money and profit. From the early days of hunting and trapping to more modern times of lumbering and mining, Muir sees paths of destruction: beavers and bison, redwood forests and pristine mountain slopes, all almost laid waste. It was not so much an individual trapper like Jedediah Smith or an individual hunter like Jeremiah Johnson, but big businesses like the Hudson Bay Company, the Pacific Fur Trade Company, clothiers in constant search for beaver fur for hats and buffalo hides and furs for robes that caused a destructive spiral of supply and demand. It was not so much the individual gold digger or silver prospector, but commercial mining involving massive destruction of mountain valleys of California and Nevada that troubled John Muir. One can imagine Muir's reaction to the gigantic Kennecott copper- mining pit in the Quirrh Mountains of Utah.

In the chapter "Puget Sound" Muir laments in Thoreauvian fashion when he observes large fur warehouses in Victoria, B.C.: "At certain seasons of the year, when the hairy harvests are gathered in, immense bales of skins

may be seen in these unsavory warehouses, the spoils of many thousand hunts over mountain and plain, by lonely river and shore. The skins of bears, wolves, beavers, otters, fishers, martens, lynxes, panthers, wolverines, reindeer, moose, elk, wild goats, sheep, foxes, squirrels, and many others of our 'poor earth-born companions and fellow-mortals' may here be found" (p. 215).

Within the forests of Washington, Muir notes, many a settler "gnawed" at the forest much like a beaver to enlarge their family lots as if these forests were 'a sort of larger pernicious weed immensely difficult to get rid of.'" But a hopeful sign for Muir is the commercial lumberman (who hacks away at virgin stands of forest), cannot help but become forest-like in appearance and manner. Though many a tree has been felled by the lumberman's axe, this destroyer of forests gradually becomes like a tree "round-shouldered and stooping" and "beginning to lean over."

In "Nevada's Dead Towns" he explains how settlements that were once roaring die down to mere ghosts after a new rumor that yet more gold has been found in a nearby mountain range. All townsmen leave immediately to strike it even richer. And within a short time a new town springs up containing "well-built hotels, churches, schoolhouses, post-offices, and jails, as well as the mills on which they all depended; and whose

well-graded streets were filled with lawyers, doctors, brokers, hangmen, real-estate agents, etc., the whole population numbering several thousand” (p. 196).

Were there any cultures in the West who attempted somehow to live in harmony with Nature? John Muir visited Utah during the 1870’s, and while he disagreed with the practice of polygamy and a certain religious sternness (like that of his father back in Wisconsin), he did find much to admire about Mormon culture. He was truly impressed by Salt Lake City in 1877 by its simple brick homes with ample flower gardens of daisies, mint and lilac bushes and with the pure and sparkling streams flowing along side the streets to serve as irrigation ditches coming down from the shining Wasatch Mountains. Indeed Salt Lake City’s many gardens served to delight its urban residents. He did not find any trace of squalor or extreme poverty as one would in San Francisco or elsewhere.

Of the Mormon people, Muir was impressed with their very kind treatment of children allowing them to run wild happily and play heartily while gathering flowers. The children of Salt Lake City seemed “remarkably bright and promising,” he notes in “The City of Saints.” And of the adults he writes in the chapter “Bathing in Salt Lake” that “however their doctrines be regarded, they will be found as rich in human kindness as any people in all

our broad land” (p. 125). Their city alone blends in nicely with its surroundings at the edge of the Wasatch Mountains that rise above the desert. Nonetheless, Muir wishes to become playful with a Mormon elder by handing a bouquet of wild flowers that he had picked in the Oquirrh Mountains to a grave and stern man saying, “Here are the true saints, ancient and Latter-Day, enduring forever” to which the shocked old man said “they are nice” (“Mormon Lilies”).

Steep Trails is a good place to find Muir’s positive commentary on Native American cultures of the Pacific Northwest that in many ways parallel his admiration for the tribal cultures in Alaska and Siberia. He sees their essential harmony with the natural world as something to be emulated, especially in light of European Americans’ destructive behavior in the mountains and basins of the American West. Though he was not impressed so much with the “Digger” (Maidu) Indians—except for their pine nut feasts—and the war-like Modoc tribe, the opposite is true of the McCloud River Indians (Winnemem Wintu) who are “wide awake, speculative and ambitious.” One McCloud boy of ten served as Muir’s teacher of Indian ways by providing him with the Indian names of plants and birds. The boy liked Muir’s favorite bird, the water ousel (ouzel) which he called “Sussinny.” He showed how his tribe made woven baskets with maidenhair

fern, and he explained that saxifrage was a tasty plant to eat. Also recorded in “Summer Days at Mount Shasta” is a Pitt River Indian (Hewisedawi) explaining to him of a time when Mount Shasta erupted so violently that the whole sky was full of cinders and threatened all living things. When the eruption finally ceased, the sun peered through the dark volcanic clouds as a blood-red ball.

Muir notes that Indian knowledge of edible plants helped save thousands of Mormons from starvation in southern Utah. During the famine years between 1853-1858, a terrible drought and grasshoppers destroyed thousands of acres of healthy crops. Thanks to the Paiutes who taught Mormons to make use of the sego lily bulb as a soup, Mormons survived. The Maidu (whom Muir and others of his day called Digger) Indians harvested great quantities of pinyon pine nuts in Nevada and held celebrations during gathering and feasting time in autumn when many bushels were roasted and stored for winter.

In “Puget Sound” Muir writes of coastal tribes who gathered seagull eggs high up on cliffs, sometimes risking their lives on slippery rocks. And the Kalamath tribe of the interior Northwest gathered the forests’ harvests of salmon-berries, gooseberries, currants, raspberries, blackberries and strawberries to supplement their diet of salmon and wild sheep meat. They

pounded berries to make a concentrated paste that could last through the winter (“The Forests of Washington”). Tribal peoples of this region did little or no damage to the great forest lands compared to new settlers hacking away at a pernicious forest. In “The Forests of Washington” Muir writes, “The monuments they [tribal peoples] have left in it are scarcely more conspicuous than those of squirrels and bears” (p. 242). Muir has discovered here in Oregon and Washington a great example of harmonious living in the wild. In other later writings farther north in Alaska, Muir praises the life style of Tlingits that harmonizes beautifully with their misty and rainy seacoast environment. Recently critics of Muir, including historians Jon Christensen at UCLA and Richard White at Stanford (quoted in a *Los Angeles Times* article—see bibliography), contend that John Muir is no longer relevant simply because he had no respect for tribal cultures of California and that he believed that Muir’s concept of wilderness was limited to national parks for the consolation of aging white males. They claim he had no appreciation for smaller parks and wild places outside the national parks. A close reading of *Steep Trails* (for that matter *Travels in Alaska* and *The Cruise of the Corwin*) would dissuade such inflexible impressions. *Steep Trails* contains many wilderness passages beyond our national parks and

praise for tribal ways of life. And his Alaskan books come to the strong defense of and admiration for tribal peoples of the Arctic.

One of Muir's prime purposes in writing essays and letters to friends and influential people was to slow down the destruction of forests, mountains and plains. He stressed the need for the wild. He agreed wholeheartedly with Henry David Thoreau's adage that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." Contrary to civilization's basic belief that the world was "made especially for the uses of man," Muir held that "every animal, plant, and crystal controverts it in the plainest terms." (See his essay "Wild Wool"). It is an enormous conceit, writes Muir, that all animals were made for the material use of man. If he were alive today, he might refrain "all men were made for the material use of the Ebola virus." Each creature, each plant was made for itself: "No matter, therefore," writes Muir in "Wild Wool," "What may be the note by which any creature forms in the song of its existence, it was made first for itself, then more and more remotely for all the world and worlds" (p. 12).

Conserving of animals, plants, and, indeed, portions of the forests themselves, is essential for the well being and natural balance of the planet and the human being himself. Such natural treasures as Oregon's forests of Sugar Pine in the Umpqua Valley should be set aside from the axe: "A park

of moderate extent might be set apart and protected for public use forever,” writes Muir in “The Forests of Oregon,” “containing at least a few hundreds of each of these noble pines, spruces, and firs” (pp. 306-307). Rivers, as well as forests were important natural balances. In “The Rivers of Oregon” Muir wants his readers to understand and appreciate the harmonious flow of the Columbia River and its vast network of tributaries from far way Yellowstone and British Columbia as well as interior Oregon. Each and every river, whether the Snake, or the Kootenay, or the Willamette contributes to this network to create a composite of rivers called the Columbia.

By the end of the nineteenth century, John Muir was becoming well known as a writer and conservationist with the publication of *The Mountains of California* in 1894 and his helping found the Sierra Club in 1892 At the turn of the century, Robert Underwood Johnson urged Muir to contribute an article on the Grand Canyon for *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. He wanted Muir to inspire his readers to pressure government and President Theodore Roosevelt to set aside The Grand Canyon as a preserve protected against mining and rim-top lumbering. Muir agreed to write the article after he finished re-visiting the canyon in wintertime. The article was published in

November, 1902 and later collected by Frederic Bade in *Steep Trails* published sixteen years later.

During the time of Muir's first visit to the Grand Canyon in 1896, even though the rims of the canyon had been made a forest preserve, trees were still being cut down, and mines operated within the canyon itself. Because Muir had met President Roosevelt during a four-day stay including camping out in Yosemite, Muir was able to convince the President to set aside finally the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in 1908 through personal letters. But the essay "The Grand Canon of the Colorado" certainly helped this process of national monument status since *The Century Magazine* had one of the widest readerships in America in 1902. Ultimately, through these efforts, the Grand Canyon became a National Park in 1911 under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson.

In order to gain the attention and appreciation of the reader for the magnificent Grand Canyon of the Colorado, Muir creates an essay that gives emphasis to the vastness of its size, and its spiritual and imaginative impact on the beholder. But he stresses the point that he lacked words to describe even one hundredth of its mystical features. He explains its vast size by using terms of comparison. It is one thousand times larger than the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. If one were to follow its rims on both sides, his

“journey would be nearly a thousand miles.” The view down into the canyon is more like looking at the surface of a star with its stony spires “pointing the way to the heavens.” Surely here at the canyon’s rim one gains a new sense of the earth’s beauty. The colors of the geologic formations over a billion years old create an “ethereal radiance.” If one sees this canyon in winter with its snow banners flying atop rims and spires, its sublime landscapes will prove to be “unspeakably glorious.” Muir’s words are like Thomas Moran’s brushstrokes in his paintings of the Grand Canyon.

If one is to experience and grasp the canyon’s spiritual power, he must go there and witness it with his own eyes. The opportunity to have such canyon experiences needs to be honored so that future generations might be inspired beyond their imaginations. It is not just rocks and cliffs and spires that attract the mind like magnets but also the canyon’s rich array of vegetation: “In cool, shady amphitheatres at the head of the trail there are groves of white silver fir and Douglas spruce, with ferns and saxifrages that recall snowy mountains; below these, yellow pine, nut pine, juniper, hop-hornbeam, ash, maple, holly-leaved *berberis*, *cowania*, *spiraea*, dwarf oak, and other small shrubs and trees” (p. 371). Deeper down, where the canyon becomes more desert-like, there are “scatterd yuccas, cactuses, agave...and

in the hottest recesses the delicate abronia, mesquite, woody compositae, and aborescent cactuses” (p. 372).

And of the mighty chocolate brown, turbulent Colorado River, one can sense the combined forces of all its feeder streams and rivers from the mountains of Wyoming, Colorado and Utah including the Wind River Mountains, the Front Range, Park Range, Sawatch Range and the Elk, Wasatch, and Uinta mountains whose rivers include the “Du Chesne, San Rafael, Yampa, Dolores, Gunnison, Cochetopa, Ucompahgre, Eagle, and Roaring Rivers, the Green and the Grand, and scores of others” (p. 377).

How could people not want to set this majestic canyon aside from lumbering, prospecting, mining, and damming? Thanks to Muir’s power of words, the Grand Canyon *did* become a National Monument and eventually a National Park.

Whether it be the mighty Colorado River or its northern counterpart, the Columbia River, a natural and harmonious multi-million acre drainage system exists in Nature that provides water for forests, and human agriculture. Even volcanic eruptions of Mounts Shasta or Lassen Peak violently create, with rich volcanic ash, fertile plains and valleys where crops of wheat, corn or grapes can thrive. The more we understand natural processes, the less likely we will be to upset balances with unwarranted

destruction of our “god-infused” planet. *Steep Trails* is a fine collection of essays that inspire the reader to experience more fully this planet not as overbearing aliens but as truly appreciative earthlings.



Grand Canyon at North Rim, Arizona

References

Richard F. Fleck, *Henry Thoreau and John Muir among the Native Americans*, 2nd edition. (Portland: West Winds Press, 2015)

Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*.(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981)

John Muir, *Steep Trails*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, vol. 8, manuscript edition).

All citations are from this edition.

Louis Sahagun, “John Muir’s Legacy Questioned as Centennial of His Death Nears,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 2014. (Local/California column)

Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination,” in *On Nature*, ed. Daniel Halpern. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 83-94

X

Homage to a Shoshone Elder

Rupert Weeks (1918-1983) was a mirthful Shoshone elder from Wind River Indian Reservation in upstate Wyoming a hundred miles south of Yellowstone National Park. He had an infectious laugh—from a 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 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 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 wearing a dunce's cap—thrice and he was denied a Christmas holiday with his parents. He remembers going to the

Friday night silent movies and cheering for the U.S. Cavalry and booing at the “savages.” “Eeh gads,” Rupert once exclaimed, “I wasn’t so much brainwashed as I was whitewashed!”

In 1933 he moved to the 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 as a cannoneer and as, when needed, as a “wind talker” speaking Shoshone to a fellow tribesman over the walkie-talkie to confuse the Germans about the troop movement of the 319th Infantry Unit from France to Belgium, Luxembourg, and southern Bavaria. He learned to speak German with daring fluency (unlike the enemy picking up on Shoshone) and met some good and friendly people in Germany and Austria who continued to correspond with him through the years.

After the war Rupert took up painting mountain-landscapes and wildlife of the rugged Wind River Range. His paintings have a distinct mystical quality—some can be seen at the Museum of the Great Plains Indian Life at Browning, Montana and in the Rupert Weeks memorial room at the Shonshone-Arapaho Tribal Headquarters in Fort Washakie, Wyoming.

He taught at the Wyoming Indian School in Ethete and became an adept storyteller in Shoshone and English for which he is best known. I had the privilege of helping him see to press his story of a maturing Shoshone youth, *Pachee Goyo* (Jelm Mountain Press, 1981), his only book. Many a grand evening did my wife Maura and I have talking with him in our Laramie home.

For several years during the 1970's he taught a class in Shoshone language and culture at the University of Wyoming where I first met him as a sit-in student. Previous to my meeting Rupert, the only Native Americans I had known were, for the most part, from the pages of books. Both university students and school pupils enjoyed his teaching because of his marvelous sense of humor characterized by a twinkle in his eye and that 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 separation from his people during his wanderings.

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 highest mountains in the state to ramble about the magnificent Wind River Range of Wyoming 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 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 of Gaston Cleric in *My Antonia* discusses the Virgilian notion of patria as “not a nation or even a province, but the little neighborhoods with ... fields sloping down the river and to old beech trees with broken tops” (p. 264). Rupert had such a concept of patria; his being the beloved “udadye” (warm valley) nestled beneath the dark slopes of the Wind River Mountains laced with distant seemingly floating snowfields and glaciers.

Late August, 1974 had come, and I left Laramie at sunrise for the reservation. Cobblestone clouds cast circular shadows on the rolling prairies with half moon crescents of rock gleaming in the rising sun—a perfect Charlie Russell painting. The Snowy Range looked as if you could reach out and touch it. Everything had a mystic air about it, and I was in a perfect mood for my first visit to Wyoming’s tribal lands. Deep in the Wind River Mountains rises Gannett Peak 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 didn’t 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.

“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 Blackfeet Indian hunting antelope dressed up like one. They gave him chase 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 a rugged canyon, he pointed out an old wagon trail made seventy-five years earlier for gathering firewood. And beyond that rose a burial mound with the remains of some of his ancestors.

In fact, somewhere (he wouldn't say 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 Lewis and Clark as a token of appreciation for help in guiding them through the Rocky Mountains on the way to the Pacific Northwest. Jean Baptiste was buried with that medal 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 traitor? We see her as a traitor. White men like you wouldn't be standing here if it hadn't been for her,” he said pausing to see my reaction, 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 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 the pine forests, we stopped to feast on wild gooseberries tart and refreshing. The chokecherries were still green, but, once ripened, they would be gathered for another year's

supply of chokecherry gravy (made by pitting them and boiling them with a bit of flour to thicken the syrup).

“Now this road gets a bit steep. You think your car will make it? She seems to be going along okay,” he mused. Rocks and stones flew out of the back of my spinning tires as 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 there? It was going for firewood when its brakes gave way.”

I breathed easily again 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 walked out into peaceful Washakie Park (at 8,000 feet) just below the jagged, snowy Saint Lawrence Basin. As we sauntered to the other end of this valley, Rupert’s eyes gleamed with pride once he knew I took to his country.

“You know the legend about Chief Washskie 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 bird cries at nighttime near Raven Butte. Now Chief Washakie knew the difference between a raven and a Crow Indian! But why Crow people haven't denied the legend I don't know, unless Chief Washakie did eat the Crow chief's heart." Again came a raucous laugh.

He pointed out in the far distance to the northeast, the dark Owl Creek Mountains and said his people never go back there. "There are bad doings in 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 back in those mountains? A.B. Guthrie's characterization (in *The Big Sky*) of a crazy tumble of Montana hills with tales of strange doings, hit home. 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. This medicine wheel is about thirty yards in diameter and is just one of a series in northern Wyoming and southern Montana. It has twenty-eight rock spokes representing the twenty-eight lunar days, and during equinoxes the setting sun and rising moon form a perfect right angle within the spokes of the wheel as my friend Victor Flach and I

discovered one September 22nd. Rupert explained that all tribes used it sort of like a united tribal calendar. It was simply a giant sundial which warned the old-time people when to get out of the high country and not be trapped by an early autumnal blizzard while hunting bighorn sheep above tree-line.

We strolled back to the car past looming white cliffs looking like giant Indian chiefs and eased the car down that winding snake of a road. Rupert guessed my thoughts and brought up the topic of rattlers. He said on certain full moons, he had seen a couple dozen of them reared up out of their coils with their heads held high in the sky. He said it was an eerie sight. Almost back in “Udadaye,” 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 of my life had sprinted past me and it was time for me to leave this land, this patria of Indian legend. 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.

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—he preferred “spirit drawings.” He was anxious to see them jimsself as he hadn't hiked back in there for 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 protruding up between the rocks here and there. Rupert told us to be on our guard for rattlers, especially hidden in sagebrush, but I didn't see any that entire afternoon. I remember once when I was a graduate student, I brought a volume of John Steinbeck out on the prairies of Colorado to read. It was too hot to wear my 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. The only way I could recover my jacket, not having any weapons, was to throw dust into his lidless eyes until he slithered away. I don't remember much of what I read of Steinbeck that day. Here on the reservation, approaching the edge of a high sandstone cliff, we angled down along a narrow trail imprinted in orange sand. By sundown we had made it to the most impressive wall of “rock art” I had seen. Countless hundreds of figures were carved into the sandstone; some looked like Von Daniken's creatures from outer space; others looked

like animals and humanoids. We sensed a sacred aura in this area high above a roaring stream. It bordered on being eerie.

As the sun set, Greg asked Rupert if he would care to share his thoughts with us. He remained silent several moments before speaking. His voice seemed distant as though he was in another world; he explained that all these spirit drawings on the cliff were not made by humans because they change, they grow. 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 river. Come just about this time of day wearing only a loin cloth. When you sit down with crossed legs, you will hear voices—actually they’re right here. You’ve both heard buzzing and humming mosquitoes nearby and sheep or cattle in the 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, speak to you. You will understand what they’re saying. Hear that coyote? Je’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 were 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 the colors lead 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; if you come with a sincere purpose, you'll wake up at sunrise (seemingly only minutes after sunset) with a 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 purpose but have later misused that power... 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 felt a bit uneasy and asked if we could leave as it was getting dark and we might not find our way back.

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 which will last one year strong enough to blow down buildings. Even the western meadow lark, who has added an extra note to his song, tells me that. If you don’t want your house blown down in that great wind, put shiny rocks around your house that will reflect sunlight back to Duma Upa who will give his protection to you.”

We arrived at our car and slowly proceeded down a bouncy, bumpy dirt 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 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 undeciphered meaning. Were the Greeks right about the “music of the spheres”? I’d like to think so.

About a year later Rupert invited my entire Native American literature class up to the reservation. We met Rupert by the tribal complex where he began to teach and guide my class. We went to the “Soldiers’ Graveyard” where Chief Washakie lies buried. “See over yonder? Look at the great and 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 pronounced him chief of all the Wind River Mountain Shoshones. He naturally cooperated fully with any land compromises that had to be made, especially concerning the hot springs of Thermopolis.” Rupert chuckled to himself and said, “He accepted a can of peaches in syrup for that land. That’s why they call him a great and wise chief.”

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

“Way back in 1868,” Rupert responded.

Rupert Weeks teaching my students in the outdoors of the reservation



Those rugged Wind Rivers rose up high in the distance laced with big white snowfields glaring in a strong autumnal sun. Crickets hummed around us emphasizing our thoughtful silence as we trekked out of the graveyard in single file. We grew accustomed to Rupert's home-place. He broke our

silence by telling us about an incident that happened to one of his great uncles back in the late 1880's. He said that his great uncle along with about eleven others went on a hunting trip that led them over a hundred miles away from Udadaye. After they had packed their horses with sufficient meat, they headed for home, but somehow got a bit lost. Worried, they all decided to do a ghost dance when they felt themselves lifted above the ground and unconscious. When they awakened after the ghost dance, they easily knew where they were and that was some ten miles closer to home! As we approached our camp, one brave young black girl from Pittsburg asked Rupert why he kept an eagle feather hanging over the rear view mirror of his pickup truck. All he said was that it was a great deal more than an eagle feather.

A half hour later, we all arrived at 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. Ripe chokecherry bushes and sagebrush lined the shore below us as we picked boulders to sit on to listen to Rupert tell stories and mythic tales of his people. He told us of 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 buffaloes and

quickly got their bow and arrows and shot one giving no thanks as they should have to Duma Upa. One warrior was so hungry he started eating raw meat with blood running 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 felt strange hooves forming on his feet, and fur started growing up his legs and chest. By the next day he had turned into a buffalo 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 had happened. Meanwhile he roared like the sound of ice breaking up---wush whooh! Rupert clapped his hands and let out a whoop. And to this day you can still hear the sound of that buffalo roaring especially when the ice cracks and booms on Bull Lake. Rupert smiled and took a puff on his cigarette.

As we slowly paced along the shoreline of Bull Lake, one of the students asked Rupert how he got the name "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 who had ghost danced) stood in line. 'What's yer name,' a soldier asked one of them. 'Wyacks,' he said. 'Okay, let's make it Weeks.' 'You,' the soldier asked the other brother, 'What's yer name?' The brother said 'Tho-ap.' The soldier then gave him the name 'Thorpe.' So, two brothers wound up with

different last names. Now I ask you, who is the ‘savage?’” With a 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 goodbye.

A number of years later, Rupert invited some of my graduate students and me to attend (as silent observers) the great Shoshone Sundance. The Indians 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 hot dogs and beans, we 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 very white Wind River Mountains which contrasted so sharply with dark lower canyons. Twelve forked pine logs (representing the twelve moons) were secured in an upright position circling around the cottonwood tree or tree of life as it is called. Then large pine branches were placed from the fork of the pine log into the crotch of the central cottonwood. They then wove willow branches between each of the twelve pine branches to form a circular roof. Leafed cottonwood branches were placed all around the outer

circle to enclose the lodge, except for an east-facing entrance. I noticed a buffalo skull had been placed up on the cottonwood trunk facing west. The structure was completed by dark; it simply looked beautiful—a living circle of vegetation.

Around midnight the medicine man appeared leading his sundancers 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 circle all night to be ready to greet the rising sun with piercing eaglebone whistles. As they sat there an amazing thing happened up in the sky. A silver cloud formed in the exact shape of a charging buffalo!

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 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 a dance had been performed, the saddest I have ever witnessed, all of his relatives were given dresses, 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 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, their spirits for the benefit of the tribe, of the human race itself. They will dance (in relief teams) for three days without taking food and only sipping water at night. And back in the nineteenth century the U.S. Government outlawed these once-a-year ceremonies during the 1880's. Why? The reason was ostensibly because it was "Savage," but I wonder if it was not the communalistic aspects of this important ceremony that disturbed Washington. The government most surely preferred individualized farming Indians to collectively organized Indians; they were easier to manage. Some administrations in Washington, even recent ones, have advocated "termination" or taxable break-ups of the reservation. But thankfully on the brighter side, since 1924, when Native Americans were awarded citizenship, the intertribal Sundance from the Rockies to the Great Plains had to be recognized under the right of practicing the freedom of religion.

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 fry-bread, and we left our tipis to race over to the sun lodge. One of my students, a tall blond-bearded fellow, saw a shorter line of people on the other side of the east entrance and crossed over to 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 the forehead mumbling to himself, “Whitey does it again!” The Shoshone people simply chuckled with no offense taken. That 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 earth-mound center. The cottonwood, with its star-shaped cambium layer and its rustling and prayerful 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 but exhilarating days and nights, could they dare touch the tree of life. It was then that it is finished, and its life, the dancers’ lives, became ours. Duma Upa would grant his blessings which, though they may not be seen, will be

felt inside. As we drove back to Laramie after having thanked our Indian 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.

References:

Willa Cather, *My Antonia*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) reprint edition.

Rupert Weeks, *Pachee Goyo: History and Legends from the Shoshone*. (Laramie: Jelm Mountain Press, 1981).



My Shoshone friend, Rupert Weeks, 1917-1983

XI

North by Northwest to Alaska with John Muir

Edward Abbey once remarked that he may never get to Alaska, but just knowing it was there was enough. John Muir knew it was there, but it was *not* enough. Alaska was for John Muir what the Maine woods were for Henry Thoreau. Alaska was the place where he learned to appreciate the wisdom of sound environmental living of the Tlingit and Haida cultures, where he observed the grinding process of huge living glaciers creating future “yosemites,” and where he was able to botanize to his heart’s content.

On my way north to Alaska I must linger for a while in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. I had visited Yellowstone dozens of times with my wife Maura and young children back in the 1970’s, and with Japanese professors and their families back in the 1980’s. The frozen shoreline of Lake Yellowstone in early May will always remain with me. Pan ice in the foreground and rising steam from distant West Thumb Geyser Basin

congealed into pure haiku. Later in the season, we loved to watch the slow summer current of the Yellowstone River with its gently rising surface rings become a ritual for us, watching that lazy river before it picked up speed and roared over the upper and lower Yellowstone Falls. Once I had a chance to chat with my old friend Robert Barbee, the former Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park and climbing companion back in Rocky Mountain National Park. He mentioned that his two favorite authors were John Muir and Aldo Leopold. He told me that Muir's words "Come to the Mountains and listen to their glad tidings," were written down just after his ascent of Electric Peak in northern Yellowstone back in 1881. He said without men like Muir and Leopold would still be in the neo-Stone Age of rampant destruction of our natural heritage. (Little did we know then that the stone age of rampant destruction would return some forty years later, alas).

My children delighted in the mud-popping, steaming and hissing of Yellowstone's geo-thermal features. Perhaps the best thing we did was take a walk along the Paint Pot Hill back in the spruce woods a few miles away from the crowds. There in the deep woods lined with bright red Indian paintbrush blossoms, we mused over a tiny thimble-sized hole in the ground violent with activity of bubbling water and hissing steam—like some miniature Mount St. Helens.

On another occasion I trekked to the summit of Mount Washburn (10,223 feet) buffeted by early summer winds, the likes of which must have fanned the flames of the great fire one summer later in 1988. Up there along a trail going beyond the summit, I could take in the whole Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and the even larger ancient caldera where 600,000 years ago a massive eruption darkened the skies of an entire continent. In the peacefulness of Yellowstone's tundra around 11,000 feet altitude, I recollected those days when my wife and I got up before sunrise at Canyon Village to see a misty meadow full of elk and snorting bison feeding on lush grasses dampened with dew. We chose Canyon Village in order to be close to the upper and lower falls of the Yellowstone River (*La Riviere des Pierres Jaunes*) as early French fur trappers called it). Many a time my family and I stood and stared at the brink of the falls to have ourselves drawn out of our bodies by the magnetism of the descending and roaring torrents three and four times higher than Niagara Falls. Though hypnotized and frightened, we felt the tensions of life dissipate like the radiating, sunlit vapors of Old Faithful Geyser on the western side of the park.

Shortly after arriving in Yellowstone at Mammoth Springs, John Muir wrote to his wife Louie Wanda on August 20, 1881 complaining that the Mammoth Springs area looked "gray and forbidding" and that the trees of

this valley hardly compared with those of the lush Yosemite Valley. The piles of ash and salt reminded him of “refuse heaps” outside of a chemical factory. Perhaps 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 and after he joyously climbed Electric Peak, his mood changed and he opened up to the splendors of the geyser basins. He wrote an enthusiastic essay for *Atlantic* in 1898 which was later incorporated in *Our National Parks* (1901):

A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling. ‘Look up and down and round about you!’ And a multitude of still, small voices 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 the angels.
(p. 82).

How Emersonian and Thoreauvian Muir became in the midst of the Yellowstone wilderness!

Due northwest of Yellowstone is a little piece of Alaska in the lower forty-eight called Mount Rainier (not far from Seattle) which John Muir visited and climbed all the way up to the Columbia Crest at 14, 410 feet in

August, 1888 just seven years after his Yellowstone experience. Mount Rainier has over fifty glaciers grinding its flanks and is considered by many to be an extension of Alaska southward because of its arctic-like environment high above its lush forests from treeline to its rugged summit. In early October, 1983 I first set eyes on Mount Rainier ninety-five years after Muir's three-day ascent to its summit known as the Columbia Crest. I had just come from Stockton, California where I spent a month examining the unpublished notes and journals of Muir at the John Muir Center. My tired eyes were in dire need of relief of a mountain wilderness. Mount Rainier, with all of its glaciers kissing the sky, was just the right place as it was for Muir after too much time working in his fruit orchards at Martinez, California. It is one thing to read Muir's fascinating accounts of crossing rough glaciers with crevasses and streaks of mountain debris, and quite another to heed Muir's call to go the mountains and hear their glad tidings. As I hiked up to Paradise Glacier with its scores of eerie and gurgling ice caves, rocks tore loose from the sheer cliffs above to come crashing down to the ice near to where I stood.

In the spirit of adventure, I climbed down to the entrance of an ice cave and crawled in under its blue ceiling to a point where I could no longer see the sky. Here, quite literally isolated from humanity, I fancied my

thoughts had become the mountain's thoughts. Joseph Campbell's contention that human beings **are** the Earth's voice—what else are they—rang true. Here I began to sense a living presence of the mountain in me and actual planetary change outside of me by spending a day on what Muir called "God's ice tool." Reaching the top of Paradise Glacier on that chilly and clear October morning with a fine view of icy Mount Adams and level-topped Mount St. Helens to the south, I continued my ascent up an arm of Cowlitz Glacier with its dark and gapping crevasse. When I reached the edge of a jagged black lava ridge, I peered up to what is called "Muir Camp" nestled under higher reddish ridges at the 9,000 feet level of Mount Rainier. And then thick mist rolled in, followed by strands of ominous-looking gray clouds. Muir Camp blurred out of sight. Knowing I must get down the mountain quickly for fear of getting lost on the steep slopes of the glacier, I carefully picked my route down to the lower valleys barely visible in thickening clouds. By the time I reached the comforts of a hotel fireplace with a crackling fire of cedar logs, I had gained some measure of Muir's exquisite joy of being in the mountains where human spirit and primal nature fuse.

John Muir's essay, "An Ascent Of Mount Rainier," originally appeared in the book *Picturesque California* edited by John Muir in 1888.

The essay is packed with the excitement of being on icy slopes, and being physically exhausted, all the while having magnificent views. After spending a windy night at camp (Muir Camp), Muir and company climbed on to the Columbia Crest of this rugged, frozen volcano in August, 1888. The climb revitalized him after a long spell at his fruit ranch in Martinez. His wife Louie insisted he return to the wilds to pick up his spirit. Muir and his traveling companions, including the artist William Keith, could not have chosen a more challenging and magnificent peak to be refreshed physically and spiritually. To quote John Muir:

Thus prepared, we stepped forth afresh, slowly groping our way through tangled lines of crevasses, crossing on snow bridges here and there after cautiously testing them, jumping at narrow places, or crawling around the ends of the largest, bracing well at every point with our alpenstocks and setting our spiked shoes squarely down on the dangerous slopes. It was nerve-tiring work, most of it, but we made good speed nevertheless, and by noon all stood together on the utmost summit, save one who, his strength failing for a time, came up later. We remained on the summit nearly two hours, looking about us at the vast maplike views, comprehending hundreds of miles of the Cascade Range, with their black interminable forests and white volcanic cones in glorious array reaching far into Oregon; the Sound

region[Puget] also, and the great plains of eastern Washington, hazy and vague in the distance. Clouds began to gather. Soon of all the land only summits of the mountains, St. Helen's, Adams, and Hood, were left in sight, forming islands in the sky. (pp. 267-268).

A few summers ago during my first evening in Alaska, a Tsimishian elder gracefully spread swan's down at Juneau's Native Brotherhood Hall to open the Nishkiya ceremony. As feathers floated through the air, my mind and spirit seemed released from all the tensions of travel; I was more than ready to listen to stories of beaver and porcupine people out in the wilds of sitka forests, rivers and mountains of panhandle Alaska following the tracks of John Muir.

Later that evening, Juneau Harbor, blinking with ship lights, did little to dispel my hypnotic state; I ambled down to the dock where my cruise would begin the next morning to Sum Dum Bay and Tracy Arm and tried to imagine what fantastic landscapes I would see. In preparation for my trip I had read two companion volumes, John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* (1916) and Samuel Hall Young's *Alaska Days with John Muir* (1915). The Tlingit and Tsimshian Indians in those days were in the process of learning English instead of Russian and a new religion from Protestant missionaries like Samuel Hall Young whom the famous Scottish naturalist from Yosemite had

met and befriended. Muir explains in his book that he wanted to hire several Indian guides (in whose stories and conversations he delighted) to go into the backcountry where he could explore glaciers. The Tlingits suggested the names of a few and Sitka Charley who would be best for that purpose because he “*hi yu kumtux wawa Boston*—knew well how to speak English.”

Dawn came bright and clear my second day up in the Panhandle of Alaska. About twelve of us boarded the “Riviera” skippered by a young man called Rusty from Cape Cod; we soon left the harbor behind us. Sitka-studded Admiralty Island looked like a Rockwell Kent print with snow-capped peaks flanked by feathery clouds of silver. On the mainland side we could make out Taku Inlet but not the receded Taku Glacier. On another day I would take a seaplane over the immense Juneau Icefields and the crinkly surface of Taku Glacier to land on a marshy inlet and tramp through the lush forests for several hours, perhaps with a bear following me. On that flight I would catch an icy glimpse of what most of North America looked like at the height of the Wisconsin Ice Age, just one of scores of different ice ages.

As our sea craft plied through waters beyond Taku Inlet, we passed numerous crab boats hauling in their harvest of snow crabs and king crabs. Within an hour we entered Sum Dum Bay as Muir had done over a hundred years earlier. We gazed at the “hanging” Sum Dum Glacier in the cloudy

mountains south of Tracy Arm fiord. Quickly granite wall engulfed us rising straight up to glaring snowfields. Streams of water hurled through space down to the emerald green waters of the fiord. Bright blue icebergs drifted past as we closed in on a tell-tale cliff carved and scratched by a myriad of slow-moving glaciers of yore. Following Ralph Waldo Emerson's lead, Muir called these scratches "glacial hieroglyphics" because they surely furnished as much geological information as did the Egyptian Rosetta Stone furnished linguistic information.

Approaching South Sawyer Glacier, we amused ourselves watching jet-black seals sunbathing on bright blue icebergs, blue being the only color refracted out of their incredibly dense masses. Our ship came to within a hundred yards of the glacier looking like an arched blue planet all of its own. A sudden thunderous boom startled us as a huge chunk of ice broke off the edge of the glacier and splashed down into the narrow bay. The Tlingit words *Sum Dum* are apt. The berg makes the sound SUM, and the echoing cliffs DUM! Aquamarine and copper-colored chunks of ice bobbed all around the glistening new berg. Here we could easily envision future yosemites. Samuel Hall Young writes in *Alaska Days with John Muir*, "Glaciers were Muir's special pets, his intimate companions, with whom he held sweet communion. Their voices were plain language to his ears, their

work, as God's landscape gardeners, of the wisest and best that Nature could offer (p. 40).

We sailed silently through the fiord as mesmerizing as the floating swan's down of the Nishkiya ceremony. In the silence I imagined an Indian's voice singing from atop some immense and icy summit. By now we had become accustomed to a world of dark blue ice, hieroglyphic cliffs, and rivers tumbling out of the sky. But we were in store for something more. Just off Admiralty Island a humpback whale rose out of the water to flip his tail fin so forcefully it sounded like a cannonade. His gigantic body rose and splashed several times before disappearing southward. Too quickly Juneau Harbor, dominated by Mount Juneau and Mount Roberts, came into view. "We camped at the site of what is now Juneau, the capital of Alaska," writes Samuel Hall Young of his and Muir's 1879 voyage, "and no dream of the millions of gold that were to be taken from those mountains disturbed us. If we had known, I do not think that we would have halted a day or staked a claim. Our treasures were richer than gold and securely laid in the vaults of our memories."

I sought a different gold as well. It wasn't difficult finding the trailhead above the city where soft rain angled down from the grayness of cloud. I gingerly proceeded along the Mount Roberts trail through foggy

forests of sitka spruce, hemlock, yellow cedar, alder, thick undergrowths of stinging devil's club, ferns, mosses, and clusters of blue lupine and red Indian paintbrush. But quickly the trail became extremely steep with a series of switchbacks. I rested for a spell glancing down on Juneau Harbor filled with fishing craft, luxury liners, and seaplanes taking off and buzzing like noisy mosquitoes through layers of fog. However, Nature's own sounds held sway. Aisles of spruce resounded again and again with the musical quiver of rising notes from a Swainson's thrush, and splashing threads of waterfalls tumbling down the flanks of Mount Juneau spun webs of mist.

I plodded ever upward. From beneath my dripping poncho I noticed how scrawny the trees had become; ferns had barely unfurled from fiddleheads> Notes from some distant thrush or warbler suddenly caught my ear, but the more I listened the more I imagined them to be faint notes from a stone flute. One cannot help but feel the presence of the Tlingit and Haida Indian's spirit in such a place as this. How fortunate Muir and Young were to have shared a portion of their lives with the natives of Alaska over a hundred years ago.

Mist cleared long enough for me to spot the glazed summits of Mount Gastineau and Mount Juneau looming about like humpback whales—only to disappear in grayness. An omnipresent wind shifted direction and blew

gently across the valley carrying the splash of many distant waterfalls. Was I in Scandinavia? The symphonic strands of “Finlandia” kept racing through my mind.

Ever upward I hiked through endless groves of leafy scrub alder bushes as if in a dream. Suddenly I was scared witless by a willow ptarmigan fluttering and clucking like some mythological harpy, trying to decoy me away from her brood of chicks. With a fast-beating heart, I continued my climb onward across glaring snowfields melted down exposing bits of green tundra in June. A denizen of the tundra, the Smith’s longspur, whistled a high note and then, a bit later, a low note. In the spirit of fun I whistled two highs and a low and various combinations of highs and lows trying to confuse him. But, of course, he maintained his beautiful composition, claiming his territory.

Finding an exposed rock, I sat down to peer through holes in the fog at brilliantly illuminated peaks above the Juneau Icefield. Time vanished up here in the Alaskan tundra; who knows how long I sat just staring at fog patterns occasionally revealing alpine penneplains. Noticing how dark the tundra had become, I became apprehensive. Mountains no longer peeked through the fog holes. Even the Smith’s longspur ceased its song. Primal

instinct warned me of an impending storm; quickly I descended to open tundra and alder clumps.

Sure enough, by the time I reached the scrub treeline, it started to pour down in buckets, making my steep and muddy trail as slick as grease. I had to catch myself a couple of times; my feet nearly slipped from under me. Thankfully, I entered the firmer ground of sitka forests not far above the silvery wet streets of Juneau. As I looked out over the shining rooftops of that city punctuated by the onion-top dome of a Russian Orthodox church, I did not wonder that John Muir returned for six more visits after 1879 to this land of mist and ice.

Alaska was extremely important to John Muir in his understanding of living glaciers and unfinished yosemites and perhaps even more importantly in his growing concern and respect for Alaskan Indians and Eskimoan peoples. He went to Alaska seven times, each time keeping a journal laced with sketches of trees, herbaceous plants, mountain valleys, totem poles, and tribal peoples. Muir met and became close friends with Tlingits, especially chiefs Toyatte and Kadachan who were like Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis for Henry Thoreau up in the forests of Maine. Incidentally, Muir loved Thoreau's book *The Maine Woods* and carried a copy of it with him to Alaska aboard the *Dakota*. Muir began reading Thoreau as early as the

1860's during his Wisconsin days and he quotes Thoreau frequently throughout his later writings. In 1906 he ordered a set of the complete writings of Henry Thoreau's works as a literary model for his own books which he began to write at the age of 54. It is interesting to note that both *The Maine Woods* and *Travels in Alaska* are comprised of three essays based on separate excursions, and each book expresses a growing awareness and appreciation for Native American cultures. Muir writes of the Tlingits:

I greatly enjoyed the Indians' campfire talk this evening on their ancient customs, how they were taught by their parents when the whites came among them, their religion, ideas connected with the next world, the stars, plants, the behavior and language of animals under different circumstances, manner of getting a living, etc. When our talk was interrupted by the howling of a wolf on the opposite side of the strait, Kadachan puzzled the minister [the reverend Samuel H. Young] with the question, 'Have wolves souls?' The Indians believed that they had; giving a foundation of their belief that they are wise creatures who know how to catch seals and salmon by swimming slyly upon them with their heads hidden in a mouthful of grass, hunt deer in company, and always bring forth their young at the same and most favorably time of the year I inquired how it was that with

enemies so wise and powerful the deer were not all killed. Kadachan replied that wolves knew better than to kill them all and thus cut off their most important food supply (pp. 151-152).

Muir respected the Indian's environmental awareness as opposed to white man's seeming lack of concern for Nature. In commenting on the deleterious effect of white man's commercialism and the introduction of alcohol to native communities on Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, Muir writes forcefully in 1881:

About two hundred perished here, and unless some aid be extended by our government which claims these people, in a few years almost every soul of them will have vanished from the face of the earth; for, even where alcohol is left out of the count, the few articles of food, clothing, guns, etc, furnished by the traders, exert a degrading influence, making them less self-reliant, and less skillful as hunters. They seem easily susceptible of civilization, and well deserve the attention of our government. (p. 122).

The Tlingits respected Muir's concern for Nature and communities living close to it. They called him "Glate Ankow" or Ice Chief. When Samuel Young preached the Christian word, they listened attentively, but

they preferred listening to Muir's ice sermons. One of these sermons went like this:

I spoke of the brotherhood of man—how we were all children of one father; sketched the characteristics of the different races of mankind, showing that no matter how they differed in color and no matter how various the ways in which they got a living, that the white man and all the people of the world were essentially alike; we all had ten fingers and ten toes and in general our bodies were the same whether white or brown or black. It is [as] though one family of Tlingit boys and girls should be sent abroad to different places and forget their own language and were so changed in habit of talking or color by the winds and sunshine of different climates. (Fleck, pp. 103-104).

A Chilcat elder responded to Muir by saying;

It has always seemed to me while speaking to fur traders that I have met and those seeking gold mines, that it was like speaking to a person across a broad stream that was running fast over stones and making so loud a noise that it was very hard to understand a single word that was said. But now for the first time the white man and the Indian are on the same side of the river, and understand each other. (Fleck, p. 104).

Thus Muir achieved a rapprochement in few ways others of that day had done.

Muir was to write two books about Alaska: *Travels in Alaska* and *The Cruise of the Corwin* both posthumously published and now available in numerous trade paperback editions. He was quite an artist and made many sketches of Alaskan glaciers, trees, and landscapes (held by the John Muir Center at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California).

Muir adored the rugged coastal shorelines of panhandle Alaska, so much so that he dashed off in 1879 dragging his friend Rev. Samuel Hall Young with him having the intention of climbing Glenora Peak in one quick day. Unfortunately, Young slipped and desperately clung to the edge of a cliff while Muir immediately backtracked down and around to save the minister's life and reset dislocated shoulders back in the safety of their ship. Not to be deterred, Muir set out once again to climb Glenora Peak by himself. Here is what he writes of the view from the summit:

I reached the top of the highest peak and one of the greatest and most impressively sublime of all the mountain views I have ever enjoyed came in sight—more than three hundred miles of closely packed peaks of the great Coast Range, sculptured in the boldest manner imaginable, their naked tops dividing ridges dark in color,

their sides and canons, gorges, valleys between them loaded with glaciers and snow. From this standpoint I counted upwards of 200 glaciers, while dark-centered, luminous clouds with fringed edges hovered and crawled over them, now slowly descending, casting transparent shadows on the ice and snow, now rising high above them, lingering like loving angels guarding the crystal gifts they had bestowed (Travels in Alaska, p. 119).

Alaska was a magnet for Muir drawing him back many times. I have been but once though I am feeling the tug of those glaciers and fiords. I suspect it won't be long ere I return.



References:

- Richard F. Fleck, *Henry Thoreau and John Muir among the Native Americans*. (Portland, OR.: Westwinds Press, 2016, Appendix of Muir's unpublished scripts, reprint edition).
- John Muir, *The Cruise of the Corwin*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, vol. 7, manuscript edition).
- _____, *Our National Parks*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, vol. 6, manuscript edition).
- _____, *Steep Trails*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, vol. 8, manuscript edition).
- _____, *Travels in Alaska*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, vol. 3 manuscript edition).
- Samuel Hall Young, *Alaska Days with John Muir*. (Portland, OR.: Westwinds Press, 2013 reprint edition).

Postscript

As a young boy summering in Maine, I well remember seeing Penobscot Indians selling their wares in Boothbay Harbor back in the mid-1940's. My parents bought me a toy, hand-crafted birch bark canoe from them and I was overjoyed. But it wasn't until I was a graduate student at the University of New Mexico that I met with and listened to tribal elders at the Taos Pueblo back in the late 1960's. One white-haired elder told me that I should climb Mount Wheeler (13,412 feet?) to really experience New Mexico. He said that he loves to drink from a cold spring half way up the mountain that was so cold "it makes your teeth hurt."

My doctoral dissertation in part involved digging into Henry David Thoreau's interest in tribal cultures and their myths and legends. I traveled to New York's Pierpont Morgan Library to examine Thoreau's eleven handwritten volumes of "Indian Notebooks" that he started at his cabin above the shoreline of Walden Pond and continued until the year before his death in 1861. They comprise his exhaustive notes on tribal cultures throughout North American and a good bit into South America, Africa, Australia, and Siberia.* They became for me a kind of back door entrance into Native American cultures with which I later became acquainted

specifically the Shoshone, Arapaho and Lakota peoples. They would become for me a substantial part of my online book *Life Above 7,000 Feet in Wyoming* (2015). As I have earlier explained, Rupert Weeks, tribal elder and Shoshone storyteller, became for me more of an uncle than my blood-related ones. He shared with me his tribe's traditions and legends as well as his love for the land of Wind River Indian Reservation. He visited my classes in Native American Studies as a guest speaker at the University of Wyoming, and he invited me and my students to come up to the "Rez" to experience first hand the setting of his stories. We'll never forget his raucous laugh after telling a funny story.

Pius Moss was a great Arapaho educator at the St. Stephen's Indian Mission School and as a guest lecturer at my classes at the university. He spent a whole class period discussing Arapaho herbal cures for diseases and various edible plants for both nourishment and the sweet tooth like the inner bark of willow sprigs. On Pine Ridge Lakota Reservation, I had the privilege of meeting Calvin Jumping Bull, official tribal storyteller (his favorite stories being those of Iktomi or the trickster spider) and Everett Catches, grandson of Chief Sitting Bull, who conducted the Uweepi or Sweat Lodge ceremony for my university class up on the reservation. Hildegard Catches, Everett's wife, also spent several hours teaching us about "*lela wakan*" or

“the sacred way.” In short Thoreau opened the door for me to Native American cultures.

As for my interest in the land, I must go back to my early youth in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. My parents always took my brother and me on the “Sheep Walk” out on a grassy ridgeline in the fields beyond our apartment and one summer weekends we’d climb Cushing’s Peak (sometimes on my father’s shoulders).

When my father opened up the Parnassus Bookshop in Princeton, New Jersey, we got to learn the lay of the land around Princeton and to the north amongst glacially formed hills. Charles Bell, and novelist and English Professor at Princeton used to take me on walks to Devil’s Cave made of glacial boulders ten thousand years ago. But what I remember most was going on birding expeditions to Hawk Ridge (near the Delaware Water Gap) with Charles Rogers, Princeton’s famed ornithologist.

After graduating from Rutgers University in 1959, I took a seasonal position as a ranger naturalist in Rocky Mountain National Park with its multitude of snow-covered peaks and living “glacierettes.” My job was to lead tourists up Specimen Mountain, a 12,700 foot extinct volcano to show them flocks of bighorn sheep eating the salty soil from old volcanic vents.

After serving in the Navy and my marriage to Maura, we eventually returned to the Rocky Mountain West and wide-open prairies to teach at the University of Wyoming, a perfect place for a Thoreauvian and former park ranger. Here on the prairies, I remember hiking out to the horizon with my colleague Walter Edens south of town on the wide open and rolling prairies of Wyoming. Walter explained that the best time to hunt for arrow points is in the early morning or the late afternoon when the sun is low in the sky to make these objects stand out more clearly. He wanted to show me a prehistoric relic he discovered just below a spiny ridge. At the base of a cliff, he pointed out aged piles of bison bones that had been part of living beasts chased over the cliff to be finished off with arrows. He brought his colleague Dr. George Frison (author of *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains*) with him a few years earlier to have him examine this place. He determined it to be a “Pishkun” or buffalo jump dating back at least three hundred years when last used and to seven hundred years when first used. Yes, my students and I thought that the University of Wyoming was situated in a mighty fine place where land is mostly sky.

* See *Selections from "Indian Notebooks" (1847-1861) of Henry D. Thoreau*, edited with introduction by Richard F. Fleck (The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, 2007), online edition.

About the Author

Richard F. Fleck is author of *Desert Rims to Mountains High* (2013) and numerous forewords to trade paperback editions of American literary naturalists including Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs. He is also editor of *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction* (1993, 1997) and *A Colorado River Reader* (2000) that the National Endowment for the Humanities selected as the reader for the seven states project in 2002, “Moving Waters: The Colorado River and the West.” For most of his teaching career, he taught American literature at the University of Wyoming. He has held visiting positions at Osaka University and Kobe College in Japan, the University of Bologna, Italy, and at the State University of New York at Cortland where he invited tribal leaders of the Iroquois Nation to speak to his classes. At age 80, Richard Fleck still hikes high in the foothills of the Rockies with his wife and family.

Richard F. Fleck in Iceland, May, 2011

