

Crossing The Divide

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Abstract—“This is a divide.” Dad delivered this proclamation with the verve of a discoverer. This memory from childhood frequently surfaces as I struggle to interpret the topology, the complicated relationship between the topography and cultural history of my home, the Green River Basin, that great expanse of sagebrush/bunchgrass steppe crowned with wilderness.

On a morning many years ago, dad announced that he was taking us to a very special place. We were camped near our sheep allotments on Labarge Creek in the Bridger National Forest in the central Rocky Mountains of Wyoming. It was late summer, after haying and before shipping and school had begun, when our family escaped to the mountains. After breakfast, my mother and elderly uncle got into our truck with dad. My two sisters and I climbed onto the flatbed and stood behind the cab to monitor our progress up the dusty road. We were following the Lander Cut-off of the Oregon Trail, a path forged by settlers in the mid-1800s en route to gold, religious freedom, and settlements west.

The old truck bumped its way down into Labarge Meadows into a cool pocket of air smelling of damp soil and growing grass. In this willowed, riparian basin immigrants staked their horses and cows to graze as they themselves rested, bathed in the cool stream, and regrouped.

The truck climbed out of the meadows, dad parked on a narrow, elongated sagebrush knoll, and we followed him to a point where we could look down at seeps of springs on either side. This saddle, he explained, divided the watershed of two rivers. Grey's River to the west, a tributary of the Snake River, would eventually join the Columbia River and flow to the Pacific Ocean. LaBarge Creek, beside which we were camped down below, began right here, he said. It flowed to the east into the Green and thence the Colorado River and finally to the Sea of Cortez.

Although enthralled with this discovery, I doubt that my father, a poor Italian immigrant, caught up with paying debts encumbered during the Great Depression, understood the importance of divides to western imperialist expansion (Worster 1985). Unfortunately, he and the loggers, whose trucks passed us in a cloud of dust, were following that imprint by reaping the benefits of the natural wealth of this public land while destroying wilderness and degrading the ecosystem. Although sheep allotments and clear-cutting have been curtailed in this region, the new threat is the

drive for gas and oil. And ecosystems are being shattered and designated wilderness threatened in many irreversible ways.

As luck would have it for me, my late husband, Paul Shepard, took to my home territory and the fishing it provided. We bought a few acres on an old homestead in the tiny Hoback Basin, geologically the apex of the Green River Basin.

Although there are many ways to get from my winter home in Salt Lake City to our cabin, I invariably follow the same route each spring. John McPhee reminds us that the “surface appearances [of the land] are only that; topography grows” and constantly changes and “is composed of fragments of other scenes” (McPhee 1994: 29). As the scene unravels on this yearly pilgrimage, albeit in fragments, I retrace the geology and the footsteps of explorers followed by six generations of my family. When I turn off the interstate onto a broad, strike valley—Fossil Basin to geologists but the Cumberland Flats to locals—I breathe deep. This is home.

I can be selective in my vision, carried away by magnificent vistas and fascinating creatures: ridges of slanting sedimentary rocks lined with junipers bordering the sagebrush-bunch grass steppe, herds of antelope and deer grazing along the road; golden eagles tumbling in the sky or picking at road kill; sand hill cranes disoriented by a sudden snow squall planing down; clusters of “drop herds” of sheep and newborn lambs.

Notwithstanding the natural beauty, I can't entirely ignore the signs of “progress.” Pump stations pock the landscape, and newly laid pipelines and mazes of roads and fences crisscross the sagebrush steppe. Recently, fields of wind generators appeared on the horizon. The strike valley I drive through is part of the great Overthrust Belt that runs 5,000 miles (8,047 km) from Mexico to Canada, a great reservoir of gas and oil that has been the impetus for massive extraction in recent years.

As I pass a little knoll near the blackened remains of an old mine, I think of my mother born near there at the turn of the century in Cumberland, a company mining camp. In response to the Industrial Revolution, dozens of coalmines opened in this region in the latter nineteenth century, influencing the selection of the route chosen for the transcontinental railroad. My grandfather, a peasant from the Italian/French Alps, was one of many foreigners who responded to the call for miners to this “new country.” The deep coalmines lasted less than a century and were replaced by a strip mine that continues to eat its way along a seam high on a ridge. At its base a smoke stack rises above a power plant surrounded by ponds of toxic effluent planted with fish that can't be eaten.

The highway descends into the small towns of Kemmerer, Diamondville, and Frontier, built along the Hamsfork River and then climbs a circuitous route out of the little valley. At Willow Springs, a dirt road heads west to my grandparents' old homestead where they moved to sell milk and goat cheese

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In: Watson, Alan; Sproull, Janet; Dean, Liese, comps. 2007. Science and stewardship to protect and sustain wilderness values: eighth World Wilderness Congress symposium: September 30–October 6, 2005; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-49. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

in the mining camp of Sublette. One summer my blue-eyed father, a foreman for a sheep company, on his way on horseback to check on the flocks on the summer range, met my brown-eyed mother who was working in a hay field. They fell in love, were married, and later bought our ranch on the lower Hamsfork River.

The road levels off as it enters the upper Green River Basin; gray-green sagebrush steppe stretches on all sides. At an elevation of about 6,000 ft (1,829 m), this is considered a cold desert, and rightfully so with limited precipitation and only a month or two of frost-free days in summer. Ramparts on the horizon—the Uintas, Wind Rivers, Gros Ventres, and Wyoming Mountain Ranges—circumscribe the horizon from southeast to southwest.

For most of geological history, the Green River Basin was part of an inner continental trough and inland sea. Cycles of emergence and submergence continued for millions of years depositing layers of sand and silt and burying organic matter accumulated during the lush, semi-tropical Cretaceous period that started 100 million years ago.

The Laramide Revolution, a massive continental disturbance, occurred about 65 million years ago. The crust was thrust to the east and sedimentary layers sheared and piled up on top of each other like shingles, forming the Wyoming Range, a part of the Overthrust Belt.

Organic matter, trapped under tremendous pressure of crustal movement, was converted to hydrocarbons and remains trapped in pools in rock layers deep in the crust. Since the 1940s, oil and gas companies have been thumping and drilling the region, buying up leases, and planning for this moment when reserves are as precious as gold and extraction reasonable in cost.

During an era of mountain building, the front range mountains to the east rose separately but successively to incredible heights out of the inland sea, the Wind Rivers to an estimated 60,000 ft (18,288 m) (McPhee 1994). A period of massive erosion and deposition followed this upheaval burying the basin and leaving only the tips of the mountains, protruding 1,000 to 4,000 ft (305 to 1,219 m) above the sediments. Then came another exhumation of the mountains when the entire region was uplifted. Glaciations followed and ice and water formed the present landscape, a broad sedimentation basin with meandering river and tributaries arising in the surrounding mountains.

The road descends into the Green River Valley along the Seedskeedee Dam, misconceived in Reclamation days. Colorful Eocene sandstone and shale cliffs frame the water that on sunny days is robin egg blue and on cloudy days, steel gray. As the valley widens into extensive hay fields and large cattle ranches, my mind shifts from geological history to the souls who passed this way before me.

Long before the immigrants entered in the nineteenth century, the mountains were inhabited by the Sheep Eaters who subsisted here year round, primarily on mountain sheep. They were ancestors of the modern Shoshones whose migratory routes to the mountains in summer and to valleys in winter followed herds of ungulates. Bison no longer roam here but elk, antelope, and deer continue a migratory pattern from mountains to steppe. Although fences and ranches have interrupted their movement, antelope from the Tetons track the longest migratory route of any animal in the lower states: 150 miles (240 km) to the Red Desert

to the east. Waves of immigrants, from explorers to entrepreneurs followed these first people. In the beginning, most travelers were just passing through, crossing the divide to points west, or like trappers and guides, were here for the short-term.

The great immigration from the east began 200 years ago following the Louisiana Purchase. President Thomas Jefferson saw the necessity of competing with the French, English, and Russians for fur trapping territories and for finding a crossing to the Pacific to establish trade with the Orient. A waterway, at that historical moment, seemed the only feasible alternative over the mountains. He commissioned Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery (DeVoto 1953) to try to find that waterway.

John Jacob Astor understood the value embodied in the little fur-bearing beaver in this rocky barrier (Ronda 1990). His plan was to monopolize the fur trade in a global venture. Beginning with furs trapped in the Rockies and exchanged for other goods at a high profit at markets in Asia and Europe, he would return to New York loaded with booty to trade with tribal people for passage, protection, horses, and buffalo meat, thus completing the circle.

Astor commissioned two parties, one led by Wilson Price Hunt (1810 to 1812), who would follow Lewis and Clark's route. Hunt, however, was advised to avoid Indian trouble along the Missouri and to head southwest. A meticulous planner, but notoriously off in timing, he remained wedded to the idea of a waterway to the Pacific. He crossed the Wind River Mountains and followed the Hoback River to the Snake, convinced that this west flowing river would take him to Astoria on the shores of the Pacific. After great tribulations and loss of life along the Snake, his party arrived in Astoria almost two years after heading out, proving one thing. A navigable waterway through the mountains had still not been found.

After arriving in Astoria by sea, John Stuart awaited Hunt's party. Undoubtedly benefiting from his miscalculations, Stuart started with a small party of men and in ten months (June 29, 1812 to April 30, 1813) arrived in St. Louis without loss of life. He had found his way over the Wind Rivers at South Pass, a broad flat divide, counter intuitive to the clefts cut by rivers that others sought (Rollins 1935). This route would become the Oregon Trail. By the time ruts were cut deep in the Oregon Trail, the beaver had been exterminated from the Rocky Mountains and the army was occupied with solving the Indian problem by killing off the bison and trading their hides. Although Astor's venture failed, he had provided the template for global trade.

Great waves of gold seekers and immigrants to the West continued until after the Civil War. The Industrial Revolution and the subsequent building of the trans-continental railroad drastically changed this region. Timber was cut to build the railroad and shipped to the treeless plains states. Coal and oil were extracted and sent east to fuel power plants and steam engines. Small homesteads were established and consolidated into workable ranches. The designation of Yellowstone National Park attracted tourists, and hunters and anglers flocked to the region.

By the turn of the century, foresighted conservationists began seeing the results of unmitigated use of resources. In due time, governmental agencies were established to regulate timber harvesting, livestock grazing, and mineral

extraction, and set aside wildlife refuges. In the mid-twentieth century, due once more to the heroic work of conservationists and naturalists, the Wilderness Act was passed. The only conceivable reason for passing this legislation, given the past proclivity for exploitation, was that lawmakers saw greater value in experiencing wilderness than in utilizing its resources.

Unfortunately, the protection of wilderness seemed to give carte blanche permission to the rape of non-wilderness lands for profit. Even with limitations on mineral extraction on national forests and designated wilderness, which under present policies may be removed, the rate of degradation of adjacent lands threatens the health of wilderness.

In marginal lands such as this, with short growing seasons and limited precipitation, no matter how well land and resources are managed, sustainability is impossible. Trees do not grow as quickly as they are harvested. Extracted oil, gas, and coal cannot be replenished. Large tracts of overgrazed land are impossible to restore. Although rewilding and restoration of lands and reintroduction of endangered species are absolutely necessary, devastated wilderness can never be replaced. And when territories of animals are usurped, they face extinction or captivity. The only renewable natural resource is water that is becoming increasingly over-appropriated and eyed by states downriver. We are naively exploiting irreplaceable reserves produced over eons. For those familiar with Jared Diamond's recent book (Diamond 2005), this region seems to be, in the worst scenario, a collapsing ecosystem and civilization, or, in the best, with closely controlled and mitigated extraction, a totally domesticated landscape.

After struggling for years for the preservation of wilderness, I no longer want to argue for wilderness as an inherent human value. I take this as a given, as do most thoughtful people who see the relationship between wilderness and the ecological health of the Earth.

Those who live in the Green River Basin enjoy the recreation offered or draw from its wealth and proclaim high stakes in the region. But the ineffable mystery and sacredness of wildness cannot be divvied up like so much cash or stocks in a company. Wilderness can provide a much more important non-utilitarian function. At an experiential level, whether being in it or just knowing that it exists, wilderness can be the common grounding that unites people of different persuasions. No matter who we are or what ideology we lean toward, we all experience wilderness in the same way. Divides and boundaries that set aside wild, untrammelled lands can become points of crossing over of many cultures and many perspectives.

As my late husband, Paul Shepard advised, we are Pleistocene beings, and are genetically conditioned to the wild landscape (Shepard 1998). Edward Casey elucidates this further: "If it is true that 'we can never have enough of Nature'—as Thoreau says toward the end of *Walden*—this is because we are already at one with nature itself through a luminous wildness held in common" (Casey 1993: 246). Perhaps it is time for crossing over to this new consciousness that acknowledges our common affinity for wilderness and the consequences of our present course away from it.

We can, of course, continue the present trend of unreasonable economic growth and proceed to domesticate and utilize every inch of this planet. Or we can take seriously the energy crisis, develop non-fossil fuel technologies, and reform our economic system and our own lives by limiting consumption and population commensurate with the health and limitations of the land (Krall, this proceedings). And we should ask ourselves, as Mardy Murie often cautioned: Do we have the generosity of spirit to leave some of this land untouched?

The users of this Earth are diverse with various claims to its resources. But in the name of prudence we should recognize the most important stakeholders, those who cannot speak for themselves. Those future generations of humans, along with the wild flora and fauna, should also be given the opportunity to live and evolve in healthy ecosystems with intact wilderness as the reference point for a sane and life-giving world.

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