

The Frontier **Wayne Fanebust**

In the 19th century, the word “frontier” was used quite frequently in the press and in public discourse. It meant wilderness, raw, untamed and largely uncharted terrain that had yet to come under the dominance of the white, Euro-Americans. While the entire continent was a frontier when the Pilgrims arrived, it is the trans-Mississippi West that typically comes to mind when we think of the frontier. It was the domain of Native Americans who lived primarily nomadic lives in pursuit of wild game, especially the buffalo. These people lived on the land and with the land, taking what it offered, with no thought or intent to alter the scheme of things. For them it was a perfect world.

As seen by the Euro-Americans, the frontier was part of God’s creation, turned over to the stewardship of the civilized white man. Believing that God had bestowed a gift and a challenge, the white man embraced the western frontier, the great unknown. Untrammelled and unplowed, it was just waiting to be placed under the yoke of civilization. People faced the wild frontier like anxious spectators standing at the edge of the world, looking out at the ultimate mystery. As always, when faced with the unknown or untried, there are some who are eager to move forward, and many who want to turn back.

People who were proud to bear the title “frontiersmen,” were those who moved forward into the unknown. They were people who believed that hard work had its rewards. They understood that in order to create a future one must not cling to the past. Except for memories of people and places that could never be forgotten, the frontiersman discarded the past and went West with a mixture of confidence and apprehension, and with some understanding of the risks involved.

In the wilderness, man could find beauty and riches, but he must invariably confront and overcome danger. While the mountains and prairies could feed the resourceful pioneer, nature could punish arbitrarily, and with a cruel hand. Resistance by Native Americans meant clashes were inevitable and deadly. The trails west were marked the wreckage of someone’s dreams and by the graves of many unfortunate travelers.

The true frontiersman chose the danger—but why? For some the danger was insignificant owing to the smallness, misery and poverty of their lives in the eastern cities. A man who had failed at everything or had been repeatedly beaten down and made to feel powerless by the powerful, found it easy to succumb to the blandishments of the speculators and the beguiling influences of some far away place. What did they have to lose?

If anything else was needed to tip the balance in favor of the frontier, it was supplied by the vicissitudes of war and politics. The Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican War left America with countless millions of acres spread across the continent. As eastern cities and settlements east of the Mississippi River increased in population, there was

pressure on Americans to move west, like their European ancestors did. It was logical but it was also slow, and there were those in the government that believed some incentive was needed to encourage settlers to go where only the army and explorers had gone before.

The great American statesman, Daniel Webster, once famously called the trans-Mississippi West “the Great American Desert,” essentially a wasteland, not worthy of consideration by thoughtful, sophisticated men. Many others, however, knew better, for they had seen the land that Webster dismissed with a sneer. They couldn’t help but notice that much of the “desert” was covered with tall, prairie grass, as high as a man’s head. It didn’t take a great deal of sophistication to infer that dirt that produced this ocean of grass, might also be good ground for growing wheat and other crops.

The “Great American Desert” concept was without longevity, and Webster’s warning was never taken seriously by the people or the federal government. In 1841, Congress passed the Preemption Act, the first land act of its kind. A man, or woman who was a head of a family, could claim 160 acres of federal land and buy it for \$1.25 per acre. For those who moved to Oregon Territory, there was the Donation Land Act of 1850. It applied those who settled in the territory before 1850, offering 320 acres of land to single men and 640 to married men.

But it was the Homestead Act of 1862--strongly promoted by Abraham Lincoln--that encouraged mass migration onto the frontier. Under its terms, a man or a woman could claim 160 acres of land on the public domain, and after living on it for five years while cultivating and improving the land, it was theirs in “fee simple.” In other words, they owned it outright. A quarter section of land was like an empire to a family in Norway or Germany, or to one struggling to survive in New York or Philadelphia. The land available for settlement was, of course, territory to which the federal government had acquired title by way of treaties with the Indian tribes.

The people who went west can be divided into four groups: the mountain man, the homesteader, the speculator and the outlaw. Each group sensed the opportunity offered by the West and embraced the challenges and dangers of the frontier. For many, the adventure would be their last because entering into the wilderness was like stepping off the edge of the world.

The iconic image of the bold, fearless, “mountain man,” is what typically comes to mind when people think of the frontier. These openly anti-social men were the first to penetrate the wild land, without maps, using only their instincts and survival skills. They were solitary creatures who shunned civilization, preferring to live by themselves, taking whatever the land provided. “These mountains will feed you,” was the refrain of the rugged, ragged tramp—a being truly in love with the wilderness and all its creatures.

In the homesteader, we see a class of people who were attracted to the frontier because of the availability of land—lots of land for farming. Within this group were both easterners and immigrants from Western Europe, particularly the Scandinavian countries.

The first wave of settlers to cross the Mississippi consisted of those who had previously farmed in eastern states, or perhaps came from states such as Illinois or Ohio. In the early 1850's, settlers peopled the prairies of western Iowa, eastern Nebraska and southern Minnesota. Proud of their success, they sent letters to their eastern or foreign relatives, describing the land and its promise.

Landmarks such as rivers, lakes and waterfalls were particularly attractive to the adventuresome pioneer. But while he or she was often amazed at the beauty of the landscape, the pioneers tended to see the utilitarian side of nature, meaning good soil for planting. The land had to be tamed and controlled so as to produce the stuff of life, like an obedient servant. Wildlife was thought of as a resource to be harvested or a nuisance to be exterminated. Native Americans were also seen as obstacles to be removed and replaced by the objects of familiar, civilized life. The challenges of the frontier were multi-faceted but the optimistic frontiersman, believed all could be conquered or controlled. Doing so was doing God's work.

Encouraged, or even enchanted, thousands of families crossed the Atlantic, leaving behind small farms with worn out soil, looking forward to acquiring a farm under the Homestead Act. And for many, that was only the beginning. If a man had some cash, he could also take Pre-emption claim, and by 1878, another 160 acres of land under the Timber Culture Act. Three quarters of a section of land was unheard of in the east or in their crowded homelands. Thus land was a powerful incentive that attracted homesteaders, a class of people that was usually law-abiding, persevering and church going--all in all, the building blocks for orderly and civilized towns and cities. Good communities need good citizens and the homesteaders eagerly filled that role.

The speculators were men who looked to the western domain as a place where they could make their fortune. Farmers were essential to developing new communities, but the speculators saw their role as running the show, so to speak. They were after economic and political dominance. Sod busters needed a place to sell their produce and buy their provisions and speculators wanted to fill that role. They were quick to understand that commerce depended upon people, towns and institutions. In pursuit of their goals, the speculators too, had the federal government on their side, for in 1844, Congress passed a town site law. It enabled a town site company to claim 320 acres in the public domain for the purpose of platting and creating a town.

Armed with maps, charts, guidebooks and plat books, the enterprising speculators flowed into the public domain, staked out their towns and then boomed their spot of wild land so as to attract merchants, hotels, churches, railroads and other hallmarks of urbanity. If they were successful, the ringing of church bells and the hum of machinery replaced the silence of the natural world. In the mid-1850's, from Minnesota to Kansas, a veritable "town site mania" swept across the west. Mark Twain once remarked, rather coyly, "buy real estate; they aren't making any more of it." This advice was taken as gospel by the land hungry, cavalier speculators and their followers, all scrambling to find the most desirable sites.

Land was one form of speculation and mineral wealth, especially gold, was quite another. The discovery of gold on the frontier often set off a frenzy of activity, a clarion call to all types of adventurers to pack up, cast aside all caution and engage in a mad rush for the riches. Gold! Indians noticed that it was the stuff that drove white men crazy. Gold! It was like someone had unleashed some sweet ambrosia into the atmosphere, and every man's nose was sniffing out the scent of wealth. Heedless of the danger and acting in total disregard for Indian rights to the land, a legion of prospecting speculators flowed into places like the Black Hills of Dakota Territory in the mid-1870's, creating towns with amazing speed.

The town site speculator that sought an orderly, formulaic method of settling the frontier understood that the customary, landmark institutions and businesses came gradually and incrementally. A favorably located town site was one that attracted merchants and homesteaders, and later, churches, schools and a railroad. In gold country, none of the routine applied as communities were haphazardly strung out in the gulches and canyons, and with wealth flowing from the streams and mountains, people: good, bad and indifferent, settled in, as if delivering a noisy, death blow to the frontier. While the plodding, farming frontier took its time to develop, the gold booms contributed a veritable flash flood of non-indigenous people to the West.

Some people chose the danger freely and willingly, for the frontier, with its high mountains, deep ravines and other dark places provided a place to hide from the law. The outlaws liked the isolation, emptiness and solitude offered by the wilderness. Unlike the sod buster who wanted to tame the frontier and make it serve man, bad men liked it for the way it was, untamed and unaffected by the law. For these men a farmstead or a church meant that the civilizing influences of the law and society were reaching into the wilderness, threatening to expose and expel them.

The outlaw has been romanced by historians over the years, elevated to a pantheon of legendary status. While many still revere the bold, bad men of the west, they were in actuality, not the kind of people who deserve recognition or appreciation. They were takers who added nothing of value to any community. They lived self-indulgent lives of violence that featured all forms of criminal behavior. The law provided guidance and protection, standards and morals for law abiding people. But for the outlaw, but it was a constant, looming threat. The frontier was all about taking risks, and all frontiersmen took risks merely by coming to the West. For the outlaw risk had another dimension: it was the law---the law that would take his life to lock up him.

The land frontier is gone. They are not making any more of it on the American continent, so we must look elsewhere to find a frontier. Long gone as well is the frontiersman of the Old West. But we are reminded of the impact that the frontier experience had on the American character every time we read a book or see a movie about the Old West, or when we drive through some remote part of the country and come upon a graveyard, and are greeted by visitors from the mysterious past.