An aerial photograph of a historic town in Nevada, likely Carson City, showing a dense cluster of buildings and a large mountain in the background. The town is built on a hillside, and the mountain rises steeply behind it. The foreground shows a grassy slope with some scattered buildings and a dirt road.

# NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Volume XXVIII

Winter 1985

Number 4

# NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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Prospective authors should send their work to The Editor, *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 1650 N. Virginia St., Reno, Nevada 89503. Papers should be typed double-spaced and sent in duplicate. All manuscripts, whether articles, edited documents, or essays, should conform with the most recent edition of the University of Chicago Press *Manual of Style*. Footnotes should be typed double-spaced on separate pages and numbered consecutively. Correspondence concerning articles and essays is welcomed, and should be addressed to The Editor. © Copyright Nevada Historical Society, 1985.

The *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* (ISSN 0047-9462) is published quarterly by the Nevada Historical Society, 1650 N. Virginia, Reno, Nevada 89503. The *Quarterly* is sent to all members of the Society. Membership dues are: Student and Senior Citizen, \$5; Regular Annual, \$15; Sustaining, \$35; Corporate Patron, \$100; Life, \$2,500. Membership applications and dues should be sent to the Director, Nevada Historical Society, 1650 N. Virginia, Reno, Nevada 89503. Second-class postage paid at Reno, Nevada. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Nevada Historical Society Quarterly, 1650 N. Virginia, Reno, Nevada 89503.

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THE COVER: Virginia City, Nevada, looking south, c. 1874.

Note: The previous issue of the *Quarterly* had an incorrect volume number. The Fall issue, number 3, should be Volume XXVIII.

## *Foreword*

This issue of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* is a special one, devoted entirely to articles about the literature of Nevada and the American West. It grew out of a fortunate local circumstance, the 1984 annual meeting of the Western American Literature Association, which was held in Reno on October 4-6, 1984.

Because many of the papers presented at this scholarly meeting seemed to be of interest to *Quarterly* readers, the Nevada Historical Society decided to dedicate a complete issue of the journal to them. The present collection is the result of that decision. The editors hope that you will enjoy learning of the literary heritage of our region, and that you will find the special issue both interesting and illuminating.

Many people graciously contributed extra time and effort in order to produce this special western literature issue, and they deserve thanks. In particular, the Nevada Historical Society appreciates the assistance of Ann Ronald, of the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Reno, and Sanford Marovitz, Guest Editor for this issue.

ELIZABETH RAYMOND  
SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR

## Introduction

SANFORD E. MAROVITZ

NEARLY A CENTURY AND A HALF AGO, lamenting that America was a poem still in search of her bard, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay "The Poet" that "the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung." Less than two decades later, in his brief Preface to *Poets and Poetry of the West* (1860), William T. Croggeshall announced that his substantial anthology was "the first [volume] of a series designed to present a survey of Western Literature." Croggeshall's West in 1860, according to his footnote to the Preface, comprised but ten states, only four of them west of the Mississippi (Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota); the others were Kentucky and the Old Northwest—the prairie country and the North Woods. Since Croggeshall's announcement, western American literature has evolved, with the expansion of the west itself, into an immensely wide and remarkably diversified field of pulp fiction, literary art, and scholarship.

But the disproportionately large segment of western writing that has attracted international attention is one of limited form and content—the popular western romance that deals chiefly with the trans-Mississippi West. At about the same time that Croggeshall brought out his anthology of western poetry, the firm of Beadle and Adams published the first dime novel, *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860), by Ann Sophia W. Stephens; this volume marked the origin of western pulp fiction in its most marketable format. Although Mrs. Stephens was a well established and reputable author of her day, the dime novels that followed *Malaeska* were written and published with increasing haste, and long before the end of the century they had become formulaic and shoddy; nevertheless, these ephemeral volumes sold by the hundreds of thousands.

In 1902, with the appearance of Owen Wister's *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, a new formula had its origin. The taciturn cowpoke hero with a lightning-quick draw and unerring accuracy with his six-gun, the despicable villain, the bumbling tenderfoot, the eastern school marm, and the climatic showdown were all introduced in *The Virginian*. With innumerable variations they have reappeared in the popular western romance since then, from the best-sellers of Zane Grey and B. M. Bower to those of Max Brand, Ernest Haycox, and Louis L'Amour. These are the stories that have captured the imagination of the world, to the extent that translations and film adaptations

have made them ubiquitous. A seemingly endless stream of such tales flows through the hands and heads of millions of readers with no apparent danger of reaching a saturation point. With respect to the foreseeable future, at least, the market for violent western melodrama remains very strong.

The principal source of the formula underlying this popular fiction originated with *The Virginian* early in the century. The brief historical period from which Wister drew for the substance of his work had then only recently passed, and it was that romanticized era he wished both to record for posterity and to celebrate. Wister was writing chiefly of the previous twenty years, but the romancers who followed him probed back a little further; the bulk of their fiction is set during the years between the end of the Civil War and the early 1890s. It was during this short span of about a quarter century that the transcontinental railroad was completed, the bison nearly exterminated, the Indians massacred or pushed onto reservations, the enormous herds of beef cattle raised and driven to slaughter hundreds of miles to the east and north, the barbed wire laid, the thriving outlaw gangs routed, the last of the large free land grants made south of Alaska, and vast areas settled by sheepmen and farmers—all the historical riches, in short, that became the stuff of thousands of pulp romances published on the trail behind Wister's lead.

Often the authors of these melodramas not only acknowledge their obvious source in history, but allege the authenticity of their fiction on the basis of it. Such naive or calculated attempts to validate western romance with reference to history may be traced at least as far back as Charles Brockden Brown's Preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799), but this convention hardly justifies similar claims by twentieth-century authors who depend largely on stock characters, bald contrivances, and oft-repeated circumstances to generate their readers' excitement over violent plots carried forward with a fairy-tail consistency. To be sure, the historical setting may constitute a general base upon which the authors construct their formulaic plots, but in most western pulp fiction the details of history, local flora and fauna, and geological and topographical formations, provide only a superficial sense of authenticity. They reflect an attempt to verify, or at least tone down, the highly colored romance with a documentable veneer of fact and thus help to maintain credibility.

But if the pulp fiction with its flagrantly melodramatic contrivances and exploitation of history has claimed the largest share of public attention for well over a century, the works of innumerable other authors before and after the Civil War have also contributed to the romantic image of the trans-Mississippi West in the popular mind. For the present special literary number of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, the editors have chosen five essays on as many different authors whose works were published between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Three of the essays—on Mark Twain, Dan De Quille, and Francis Parkman—have a decidedly historical

cast; another—on Everett Ruess—is chiefly biographical; and the final one, toward which the first four point, is the literary analysis of a major western novel, *The Track of the Cat*, by Walter Van Tilburg Clark.

Among the most enduring of our nineteenth-century American authors, Mark Twain brings together in his work an assortment of different genres and aims, not the least important of which, to Twain himself at least, was to earn money for him. As much of his writing testifies, Twain had a strong sense of history, and there can be little doubt of his awareness that he was living through one of America's most exciting periods during his few years as a silver speculator and journalist in and around Virginia City, Nevada Territory, early in the 1860s. He became popular as a western author from his reporting for the *Territorial Enterprise* during those years and from the uproarious volume he composed later on the basis of his experience gained first in traveling to the Nevada Territory, and then in practicing his trade as a frontier journalist with an almost compulsive desire for amassing a quick fortune.

That volume, of course, was *Roughing It* (1872), a semi-autobiographical narrative that Twain filled with details of contemporary life in Virginia City and the surrounding area. He focused at some length on "silver fever" and its effects, on legal matters related to claims and mines, and on the methods of working the mines themselves. It was history in the making, and Twain knew it. He was, however, neither an historian nor a pedestrian, fact-hunting, objective journalist, but an ironist with a decided flair for the romantic and a comic sense that has kept readers laughing over his best work for more than a century. More concerned sometimes with the marketability and literary success of his work than with historical accuracy, Twain did not always distinguish clearly between that and authorial license, and as a consequence scholars over the years have attempted to do it for him. In the opening article of this special number of *NHSQ*, Edgar M. Branch deals specifically with this problem in tracing the "blind lead" episode of *Roughing It* through its historical sources. Point by point he illuminates Twain's account with detailed references to contemporary documents and simultaneously discloses the intimacy with which history and literature are conjoined.

Another literary journalist of the period, also associated with the *Territorial Enterprise* but for decades longer than Twain, was Dan De Quille. Highly regarded by his contemporaries, De Quille's reputation over the years has inevitably suffered as a consequence of comparisons between his work and Twain's. Nevertheless, as Lawrence I. Berkove convincingly suggests, De Quille's contribution to the development of the tall tale and other types of humorous regional sketches on the order of Twain's are too important to be neglected. In his essay on De Quille, he describes and discusses eleven forgotten articles by the journalist, written during the late 1880s, long after the glory days of Virginia City had passed. But the era remained vital in De Quille's memory as a direct result of his living through it, and by allowing his

imagination to work freely with these recollections, he converted them into literary pieces deserving of the attention Berkove gives them here.

In contrast to Twain and De Quille, both of whom employed history for chiefly literary purposes, Francis Parkman was an historian by vocation. Yet as Robert Thacker reveals, by carefully comparing Parkman's journals with his *The Oregon Trail* (1849), the historian was conscious of the need to add tone and drama to his earlier observations in order to write a true account of the West. Well read in the western literature of the 1820s, '30s, and early '40s, Parkman had formed a preconception of what he would find in the West based on these writings. Yet, as Thacker indicates, once he had arrived on the prairies and plains, he found the preconception to be faulty, that of a literary West rather than a real one. By the time he commenced writing *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman was prepared to describe the West as he had seen and felt it rather than as merely another representation through literary convention. Even then, however, he could not avoid the occasional use of such conventions himself in order to be both objectively and subjectively true. Parkman's panorama of the West is an ambiguous one, shaped by his poetic imagination as well as by observations he had written out as he traveled.

If Parkman was at times emotionally taken by the real West, he was never altogether overcome by it, which seems to have been the case with an obscure young artist and writer who simply "disappeared" while traveling alone in Utah late in 1834. In his portrait of Everett Ruess as a western romantic, Stephen L. Tanner draws chiefly from Ruess's letters to reveal a sensitive young man longing for adventure. Like Parkman and, nearly half a century later, Owen Wister, Ruess traveled west in search of revitalization, and he soon found himself so enraptured by the surrounding wilderness that his letters disclose psychological responses bordering on mysticism. Tanner makes a strong, sound case in his sketch of Ruess's life and work that the young adventurer's writings, though relatively spare (he "disappeared" at the age of only twenty), offer superb literary insight into the romantic western experience.

Fifteen years after Ruess's "disappearance," Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Track of the Cat* (1949) was published. According to Anthony Collis, in this heavily symbolic novel Clark depicts Hal Bridges as an ideal western hero whose breadth of vision enables him to "bridge" the chasm between the opposing moral extremes represented predominantly by his two brothers. Of the five essays in this collection, Collis' analysis of *The Track of the Cat* is the only one devoted entirely to literary interpretation. In a sense, Clark transcends time and place in his final novel by closely limiting his cast of characters and allowing them to operate socially within a relatively narrow sphere of action. The stark moral conflict, projected through dynamic and compelling symbols, universalizes the novel and frees it from specific ties to an actual Nevada setting. Because Collis' reading of *The Track of the Cat* exposes the

dangers Clark saw in moral extremism, it also offers a gloss to Tanner's portrait of Ruess, whose pursuit of a romantic aesthetic ideal appears to have been little short of fanatical, a chase that ultimately may well have led him to topple over the edge of both sanity and life.

That history is written most perceptively and truly when selected facts are heightened discretely by the imagination may be seen most clearly in the first three essays we have included in this special issue of the journal; in contrast, the fourth exposes the dangers of an aesthetic quest made without due regard for natural contingencies; and the closing one, the only one to deal with a work of pure fiction, suggests that mediation and harmony are the keys to a true understanding of one's moral role in an imperfect world. In all five essays, though to a greater or lesser degree in each, presentation of the *here* and *now* is made more effective when the "facts" are considered with a literary turn of mind.

# *Fact and Fiction in the Blind Lead Episode of Roughing It*

EDGAR M. BRANCH

A 'BLIND LEAD' IS A LEAD or ledge that does not 'crop out' above the surface. A miner does not know where to look for such leads, but they are often stumbled upon by accident in the course of driving a tunnel or sinking a shaft.

—Mark Twain in chapter 40 of *Roughing It*.

## I

In chapter 40 of *Roughing It* three Aurora mining partners—the narrator, his friend Calvin Higbie, and A. D. Allen, identified as the foreman of the Wide West mine—lay plans to claim a fabulously rich blind lead that they believe will make them millionaires. Higbie, having surreptitiously explored the Wide West excavation, had discovered the blind lead going “its independent way through the Wide West vein,”<sup>1</sup> a productive ledge near the top of Last Chance Hill, Aurora, in the Esmeralda Mining District of Nevada Territory.<sup>2</sup> He announces to the others: “We are going to take possession of this blind lead, record it and establish ownership, and then forbid the Wide West company to take out any more of the rock” (*RI*, p. 255). The three partners locate and record their 600-foot claim by 10 p.m. that night. The next day, we must assume, they obtain the court injunction (alluded to by Higbie) against the Wide West, for the claim is theirs to develop. The district mining laws, we are then told, required locators “to do a fair and reasonable amount of work on their new property within ten days after the date of the location, or the property was forfeited, and anybody could go and seize it that chose” (*RI*, p. 258). But owing to a series of incredibly careless mistakes, all three partners absent themselves from Aurora during the crucial period and no one of them performs the required work.

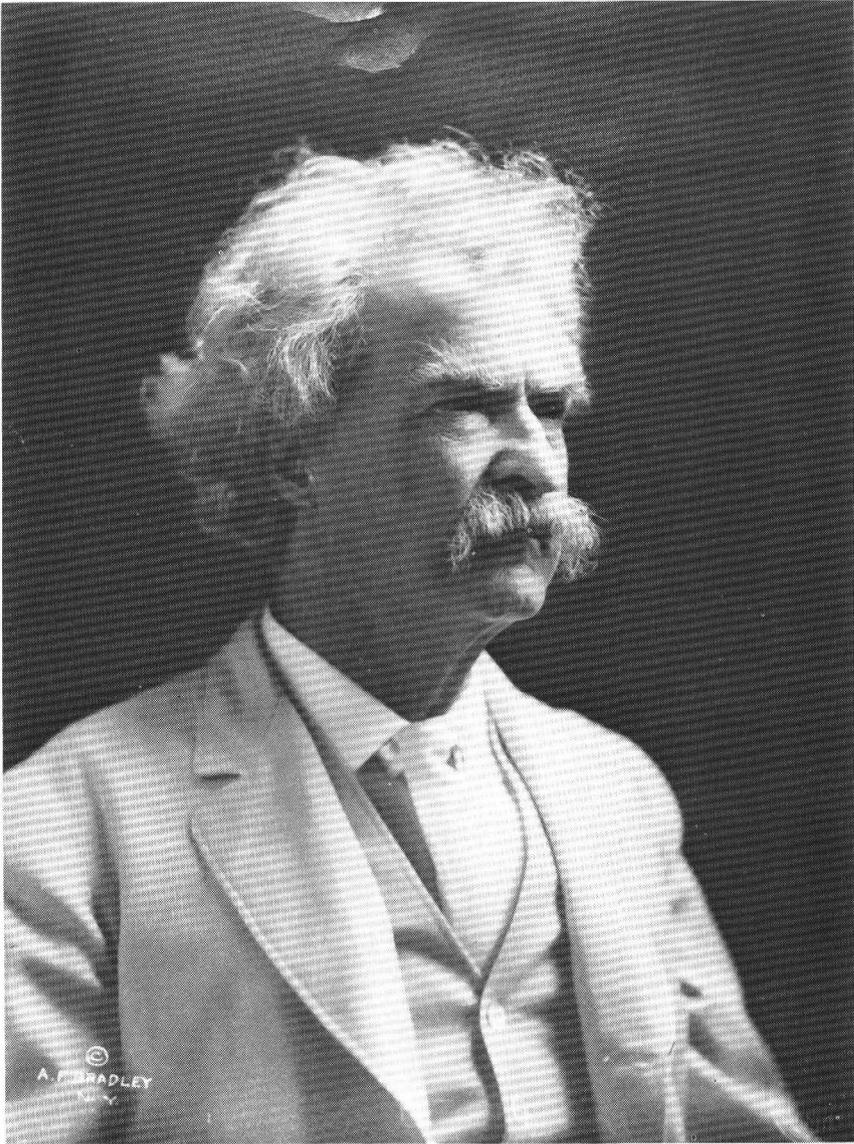
At the stroke of midnight on the tenth day a group of armed men proclaim *their* ownership by relocating the blind lead under the name of “Johnson.” Allen, who “put in a sudden appearance about that time, with a cocked revolver in his hand” (*RI*, p. 263), is cut in by the new owners for one hundred feet. But the claim has been legally “jumped,” and the other two partners have lost all rights to the blind lead. The narrator mournfully reflects



Mark Twain, c. 1870. (Nevada Historical Society.)

that he and his cabin-mate Higbie “would have been millionaires if we had only worked with pick and spade one little day on our property and so secured our ownership!” (*RI*, p. 264).

Following this sad tale of loss, the author momentarily speaks out in the



Mark Twain, c. 1900. (Nevada Historical Society.)

voice of the real life Samuel Clemens. The story of the blind lead, he asserts, “reads like a wild fancy sketch, but the evidence of many witnesses, and likewise that of the official records of Esmeralda District, is easily obtainable in proof that it is a true story” (*RI*, p. 264). Thirty-four years later Clemens reaffirmed the truth of the story: how he and Higbie claimed “a rich blind lead in the Wide West Mine in . . . Esmeralda—and how, instead of making



Composing room of the *Territorial Enterprise*, Virginia City, Nevada. (Nevada Historical Society.)

our ownership of that exceedingly rich property permanent by doing ten days' work on it, as required by the mining laws, [we failed] to save our fortune from the jumpers."<sup>3</sup>

Higbie, the "Honest Man" of *Roughing It's* dedicatory inscription, also recalled the episode. In his reminiscences he recorded that he entered the mine not surreptitiously, but at the invitation of the superintendent. "There had been quite an excavation made in the chimney," he wrote, "and while walking about . . . I discovered a cross vein running diagonally across this chimney, and . . . I was confident it was a permanent and distinct vein . . . Accordingly I made a mining location on this cross vein, as the mining laws permitted me to do, and put Sam L. Clemens' name on the location notice."<sup>4</sup> Higbie casually referred to the occasion "when our mine was jumped" (*MTA* 2:255) in a letter to Clemens dated March 15, 1906. There and in his reminiscences, where he put most of the blame for the loss on Clemens, he treated the claim-jumping as unquestionable fact.

Despite such protestations, Mark Twain's story of the blind lead has been regarded as a tall tale easily qualifying as a "a wild fancy sketch." The discovery and promise of the blind lead has been taken as a bit of literary wish-fulfillment, and its loss as a literary stroke underlining the tenderfoot's disillusionment. Yet for the most part this famous episode is not only founded

on an actual episode, but also keeps reasonably close to the facts throughout. There is but one major exception: in telling his story, Mark Twain substituted the name Wide West for what was, in fact, the Pride of Utah mine.

Contemporary newspaper reports reveal that late in May, 1862, Wide West miners struck a ledge of decomposed quartz “as thickly spangled with gold, to say nothing of silver, as a turkey’s egg is with specks.”<sup>5</sup> Mark Twain describes this rock in *Roughing It* as “black, decomposed stuff which could be crumbled in the hand like a baked potato, and when spread out on a paper exhibited a thick sprinkling of gold and particles of ‘native’ silver” (*RI*, pp. 252-253). At first, visitors to the mine were allowed to carry away specimens, and Higbie wrote in his reminiscences (Phillips, p. 70) that some of the Wide West miners secretly packed lunch pails every night with the rich ore. Aurora hummed with excitement, heard as far away as San Francisco. The great Wide West bonanza had begun. In an 1879 report summing up mining activity in Aurora, W. M. Bunker identified the Wide West ground as the location of one of “only three true chimneys of ore on Last Chance Hill.” The chimney extended some 1,200 feet and was 36 feet wide. From it came ore that “was an electrum of gold and silver, valued at \$6½ per ounce.”<sup>6</sup>

Clemens wrote his brother Orion on June 2, 1862, that he had a sample of this Wide West “decom” in his possession. He immediately added that he had become part owner of an undeveloped ledge, identified in his next letter to Orion as the Annapolitan, which lay just below and parallel to the Wide West ledge on Last Chance Hill. “The Annapolitan,” he wrote Orion, “we hope will be the Wide West’s rich ledge”<sup>7</sup>—that is, he hoped it would be an extension of the vein from which Wide West’s “decom” was coming. He and the other owners—Horatio Phillips, Calvin Higbie, and George McNear—at once began to sink a shaft. It was not far from the Wide West tunnel that was disgoring the spangled quartz, and it was about 100 feet from the ends of the Pride of Utah claim and the newly located Dimes claim. Both these claims lay about the same distance down Last Chance Hill below the Wide West as the Annapolitan did. Clemens’ map of that portion of the hill (drawn in his letter to Orion dated June 22, 1862, and reproduced here) shows the Annapolitan claim line butting almost end to end with those of the Pride of Utah and the Dimes.

By mid-June it became publicly known that the rich Wide West “decom” was coming not from the original Wide West discovery lode, but from the Dimes ledge. Contemporary newspaper descriptions establish that the Dimes vein cut underground diagonally across the Wide West ledge. It had been laid bare as Wide West miners pushed their shaft and drifts deeper into the hill. Clemens summed up the situation for Orion:

You see the grand rock comes from the “Dimes,” in reality, and not from the W. W., although the latter said nothing about it until they had bought into the former. The “Annapolitan” shaft is about 200 feet from the P. of Utah and Dimes-W. W. shafts.

These two ledges are so close together that I can't see how ours could be crowded between them—and we are most damnably “mixed” as to whether the ‘Annapolitan’ will prove to be the “Dimes” or the “Pride of Utah.” We want it to be the former—for in that case we can hold all our ground—but if it be the “Pride of Utah” we shall lose all of it except fifty feet, as the “P. of U.” was located first.

He preferred the Dimes alternative, but it seemed he could not lose either way. The Annapolitan, situated in such “a good neighborhood . . . *does* seem like a dead sure thing”<sup>8</sup>—an extension either of the Dimes or of the Pride of Utah.

Clemens’ statement shows that at this time he was preoccupied with the Annapolitan as a potential source of wealth. More than three weeks after the Wide West strike, there is no suggestion that he, Higbie, and Allen had acquired title to any portion of the Dimes blind lead. His statement reveals that others had located the Dimes quite recently, after and not before the location of the Annapolitan. It also makes clear that the Wide West owners, aware of the lucrative vein intersecting their ledge, had promptly taken steps to buy into it.<sup>9</sup> The facts do not support the *Roughing It* version that Higbie was the first to suspect that the Wide West’s “decom” came from a blind lead, that he then surreptitiously identified the lead in the Wide West’s underground works, and that he, with Clemens and Allen, located it and became the new owners.

## II

In his letter of June 22, Clemens also wrote: “They have struck it fully as rich in the ‘Pride of Utah’ as in the ‘Wide West.’ ” The next day “Veni, Vidi,” the Aurora correspondent of the Sacramento *Daily Bee*, wrote that the yield from the Price of Utah’s rich “rotten quartz” was “about a thousand dollars per day. . . . Clayton’s mill cleaned up yesterday after a week’s run on the ‘Pride of Utah’ rock, and the yield of gold was *one wooden pail full*—more than a man could conveniently carry.”<sup>10</sup> Thus by June 15, Clayton’s mill had begun crushing Pride of Utah ore, and by June 22, the day of Clemens’ letter, the results of a week’s run were known. Clayton’s mill, located on nearby Martinez Hill, was precisely where Clemens, short of funds, was being trained in the milling business at this time. His boss was J. E. Clayton, who in 1860, had laid out the town of Aurora and with A. D. Allen had located the Real Del Monte mine on Last Chance Hill. Clemens must have had firsthand knowledge of the richness of Pride of Utah rock, and considering the proximity of the Pride of Utah and the Annapolitan, his expectations and anxieties must have intensified. It would turn out that the Pride of Utah strike, like that of the Wide West, actually was in a blind lead; but neither newspaper notices nor Clemens’ letters mid- to late-June suggest that the fact was yet known by anyone.

Clemens’ letter of June 22 also stated: “There is an extension on the ‘P. of



Virginia City, Nevada, c. 1869. (Nevada Historical Society.)

U.’ [presumably reaching toward Annapolitan ground], and in order to be on the safe side, we have given them notice not to work on it.” These words reveal that Clemens and his associates had slapped a limited injunction on the Pride of Utah over potentially disputable ground. Very possibly this injunction, coming shortly before June 22, actually was the same one referred to by Higbie in *Roughing It* as about to be laid on the Wide West.

Whether or not it was, considerable evidence supports the conclusion that the Pride of Utah mine, and not the Wide West, was the place where Higbie discovered the blind lead, but that Mark Twain in *Roughing It* chose to substitute the Wide West for the Pride of Utah. This very substitution surfaces in a brief section of the blind lead episode in *Roughing It*, where Mark Twain was trying to show the great value of Wide West ore. He wrote that 1600 pounds of it “was sold, just as it lay, at the mouth of the shaft, at *one dollar a pound*; and the man who bought it ‘packed’ it on mules a hundred and fifty or two hundred miles, over the mountains, to San Francisco, satisfied that it would yield at a rate that would richly compensate him for his trouble” (*RI*, p. 253). Clemens himself originally reported this event from Aurora for the *Territorial Enterprise* on July 13, 1862: “Sol Carter purchased sixteen hundred pounds of decomposed Pride of Utah rock from the company, in the beginning of the week, for which he paid one dollar a pound in

Esmeralda, June 22, '82.

My Dear Bro:

Things are going on pretty much as usual. Our men are still at work on the "Annapolitan" and "Flyaway," but we are doing nothing on the "Morriston," as the other parties have until the end of this month to appeal in. They have struck it fully as rich in the "Pride of Utah" as in the "Wide West." Here is the position of the ledges:



You see the grand rock comes from the "Dimes," in reality, and not from the W. W., although the latter said nothing about it until they had bought into the former. The "Annapolitan" shaft is about 200 feet from the P. of Utah and Dimes-W. W. shafts. ~~The~~ two ledges are so close together that I don't see how ours could be crowded between them - and we are most damnably "mixed" as to whether the "Annapolitan" will prove to be the "Dimes" or the "Pride of Utah." We want it to be the former - for in that case we can hold all our ground -

Letter from Mark Twain to his brother, Orion, depicting the "Pride of Utah." (Courtesy Samuel Clemens Collection (#6314-q), Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia Library.)

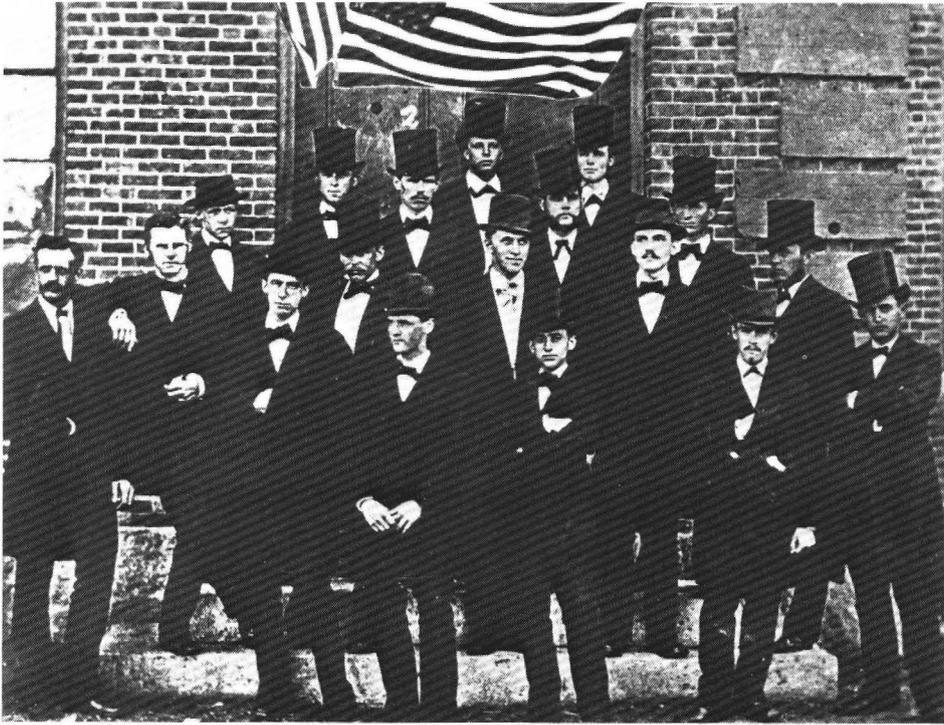
cash, and shipped said rock to San Francisco by his pack train."<sup>11</sup> When he wrote *Roughing It*, Mark Twain had at hand the scrapbook, sent to him by Orion, containing his *Enterprise* articles. The use of identical numbers in the

two versions quoted above indicates that in preparing his 1872 manuscript he reread and closely followed his 1862 letter, eliminating Sol Carter's name and renaming the Pride of Utah mine the Wide West.

Mark Twain's retention in *Roughing It* of the name "Johnson" for the lost and relocated blind lead is, in itself, persuasive evidence for the substitution discussed here, for Peter Johnson who relocated the blind lead was a major owner of the Pride of Utah mine. Moreover, by early July it became known that just as the source of rich ore coming from the Wide West was the Dimes blind lead, so the source of the Pride of Utah strike was what soon was known as the Johnson blind lead; and through the remainder of 1862, the Johnson and Pride of Utah lodes are consistently linked in news reports as part of a single mining operation. Thus the reporter for the *Esmeralda Star*, guided by Peter Johnson, descended the Pride of Utah shaft "about thirty feet when we came to a cut in the solid rock to the left, and followed it until we came to another large chamber where the richest ore has been struck on the Johnson lode."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, in *Roughing It* Higbie's descent into the Wide West to verify his surmise about the presence of a blind lead there is given in similar terms. He went down the shaft and "disappeared into the gloom of a 'side drift,'" (*RI*, p. 254) which led to the blind lead.

Also by early July the Aurora community recognized that the two blind leads—the Dimes and the Johnson—were part of a single underground vein. Clemens himself was one of the first to articulate the connection. Writing on July 13, to the *Territorial Enterprise*, he identified the Johnson lode as "a cross ledge running through the Pride of Utah and the Wide West." It was, he said, "the one from which these two companies have been taking their wonderful rock."<sup>13</sup> In his letter of June 22, 1862, to Orion, Clemens had already identified the blind lead running through the Wide West claim as the Dimes. So it is clear that the Dimes and the Johnson blind leads were at opposite ends of a single underground vein that cut across both the Pride of Utah and the Wide West ledges. "Veni, Vidi" made the same observation on July 3, 1862: "These leads [Wide West and Pride of Utah] run along, side by side . . . and the rich deposits recently found were in a vein running at right angles across these leads. Both these companies struck the cross lead about the same time, and worked towards each other and are now about coming together," as, in fact, they soon did, forming one interconnected excavation and, on November 11, 1862, one consolidated company.<sup>14</sup> Thus it may be said that the Dimes, once approached through the Wide West, and the Johnson, once approached through the Pride of Utah, became parts of a single mine system to which all mine entrances eventually gave access. In one sense, long before Mark Twain wrote *Roughing It*, the Johnson blind lead *was* the Dimes, and the Pride of Utah *was* the Wide West—a quixotic legitimization of the substitution Mark Twain made in 1872.<sup>15</sup>

Very likely Mark Twain substituted the Wide West for the Pride of Utah in



The Third House, Virginia City, Nevada. Far left is Mark Twain. (Nevada Historical Society.)

order to associate his tale of the blind lead with Aurora's most famous bonanza—the Wide West. Happily, this substitution enabled him to avoid mentioning the Pride of Utah and the Dimes claims, and thereby to simplify his narrative.

### III

On July 1, 1862, Peter Johnson located and recorded the Johnson lode.<sup>16</sup> We have seen that before it received its name “Johnson” on July 1, this lode was the blind lead represented in *Roughing It* as located and owned by the narrator, Higbie, and Allen. Possibly it is significant that Johnson's relocation of the lode came approximately ten days after the injunction mentioned in Clemens' letter of June 22, 1862, was served on the Pride of Utah. Ten days sticks in Clemens' memory as the time period crucial in his loss of the blind lead. He believed that the district mining laws required locators to “work on their new property within ten days after the date of the location, or the property was forfeited” (*RI*, p. 258). Section 11 of the then current regulations of the Esmeralda Mining District mentions a ten-day limit. It specifies that “all surface claims shall be worked within ten days after there is sufficient water to successfully work said claims.” However, the partners had claimed

an underground blind lead, not a surface claim. The provision that may have applied to them is in section 7: "All persons holding quartz claims, shall work to the amount of two days for each claim in each and every month after the recording of said claims."<sup>17</sup> This statement may be interpreted to mean that to keep their claim the partners were required to do two days' work in June between the date of recording (indicated by Clemens' correspondence to have been on or about June 20, 1862) and July 1. *Roughing It* states that the blind lead became " 'relocatable' . . . At midnight of this woeful tenth day" (*RI*, p. 263), and that it was in fact relocated then—a statement seemingly in accord with the facts.

The crucial factor here seems to be not the number of days—nine, ten, or eleven—that had passed without the performance of work, but rather the passing of the old month, June, and the arrival of July, an event that may fortuitously have happened as day eleven began. On this interpretation, Peter Johnson, seeking to reestablish his control over the rich blind lead that cut through his property, the Pride of Utah ledge, relocated the claim at midnight on June 30, and recorded it July 1, after the claim's former owners had failed to show up during June to put in the required work. Johnson soon consolidated the two companies into the Johnson and Pride of Utah Mining Company (Mark Twain in *Roughing It* [p. 264], again substituting "Wide West" for "Pride of Utah," makes the consolidation between the Johnson and the Wide West). The new company was incorporated on October 1, 1862, for \$1,400,000, with 5,600 outstanding shares—600 was the number of shares owned by the three partners in the blind lead that was taken over by Johnson.

Clemens (in *Roughing It* and in his Autobiographical Dictation of March 26, 1906) and Higbie (in his letter of March 15, 1906 to Clemens) agree that Clemens was away from Aurora attending his good friend Captain John Nye (bedridden at a ranch a few miles northwest of Aurora) when Peter Johnson made his relocation. Clemens' 1862 correspondence shows that his stay with Captain Nye, said in *Roughing It* to have been nine days, came between June 25 and July 9, 1862, the dates of two letters he wrote from Aurora to Orion. His letter of Wednesday, July 9, begins: "I am here again. Capt. Nye, as his disease grew worse, grew so peevish and abusive, that I quarreled with him and left."<sup>18</sup> The same letter also establishes that Higbie left Aurora "last week" to search for the legendary Whiteman cement mine, supposedly on the Owens River, while Clemens was out of town nursing Nye. "Last week" can be interpreted to mean the week beginning Sunday, June 29, or the period of seven days preceding the seven days ending July 9, namely June 26 to July 2. Mark Twain asserts in *Roughing It* that the third partner, Allen, was in California during the crucial period until a few minutes before the relocation, when he turned up, gun in hand, to get his cut in the new Johnson claim.

The particular time period that Higbie and Clemens were absent from Aurora supports the belief that they did, indeed, locate and lose a blind lead

and that it was situated within the Pride of Utah diggings. It appears to exclude the possibility that their location of the blind lead came during the peak of the Wide West excitement, one month earlier, when they were in town. By the time of their absence, when Johnson's relocation occurred, the entire community had long since known all about the Dimes blind lead, and the Wide West had gained control of it.

It is equally clear that neither Clemens nor Higbie was in Aurora on June 30, the night of Johnson's relocation, nor soon after. Clemens wrote in *Roughing It* that he straggled into town from Captain Nye's bedside, fifteen minutes before midnight on June 30, noticed the excited group of men collected near the Wide West croppings, and then, dead tired, decided to go straight to his cabin. According to *Roughing It*, Higbie coincidentally entered Aurora that same night by another road, five or ten minutes after midnight, just too late to stop the relocation. But Clemens' letter of July 9 indicates that he had only recently returned to Aurora by the evening of July 8, when he had received a message from Higbie still at the cement diggings. The picture in *Roughing It* of the two partners entering Aurora by different roads at the last minute before Johnson's relocation of their claim is an instance of Mark Twain's effective manipulation of time for dramatic effect—to intensify the poignancy of the loss by a last minute, nearly missed recovery. Likewise, Mark Twain's statement in *Roughing It* that the disappointed partners immediately cleared out of Aurora for a month or two “on a new mining excitement” (*RI*, p. 263) is disproved by Clemens' numerous Aurora letters during July and August. Not until late August did the two men ride out of Aurora. Their purpose was to find the Whiteman cement mine; but frustrated, once again, in this search, they spent most of their two weeks' absence vacationing in the Mono Lake-Yosemite region—an adventure partly recorded in chapters 37 to 39 of *Roughing It*.

The absence of Clemens and Higbie during the week following Johnson's relocation on July 1, suggests that Johnson's action took them by surprise; that they were unaware their title to the blind lead became vulnerable that day. It suggests they may have believed that section 7 of the mining laws (“All persons holding quartz claims, shall work to the amount of two days for each claim in each and every month after the recording of said claims.”) required them to begin work on their claim not in June, but only in July, the first *full* month after location. That two experienced miners would have acted carelessly on that assumption, with so much at stake, seems unlikely. Yet perhaps it is less unlikely than the explanation given in *Roughing It*: that two hell-bent-for-riches partners, having carelessly failed to get in touch with each other, nevertheless left town shortly before the date they knew their bonanza would be up for grabs if work remained unperformed. In giving that explanation in *Roughing It* Mark Twain may have wished to underline human fallibility and the role of circumstance in one's fate.

Following Johnson's relocation, Clemens continued to take an interest in

the affairs of the Wide West and Pride of Utah claims. His newspaper letter dated July 13, the only one from this period now known to exist, records early maneuvers of the two companies well before their consolidation in November. It also reflects the resiliency of his spirit following his numbing loss and, no doubt, his corrosive self-blame. Johnson, he reported, had begun sinking a shaft on the Johnson lode:

[But] during the week the Wide West Company have sprung an injunction upon the Pride of Utah, and stopped that company from working—which was the severest blow the prosperity of the district has yet received—for, otherwise, by this time, fifty men and a dozen teams would be constantly at work for the Pride of Utah. But on the 8th, the Pride of Utah boys returned the injunction compliment upon the Wide West in a rather novel manner. The excavations of the two companies have run together, and early on the morning of the 8th, some disinterested members of the Pride of Utah Company built a fire of such aromatic fuel as old boots, rags, etc., in the bottom of their shaft, and closed up the top, thus converting the Wide West shaft into a chimney. As there was scarcely room enough for the smoke, of course there was no room at all for workmen—and labor was suspended on both ledges, for that day at least.”<sup>19</sup>

Is there additional corroborating evidence that the three partners located and lost the blind lead claim taken over by Johnson? “Veni, Vidi” supplies a tantalizing statement pointing in that direction. In discussing the strife between the two companies interested in the blind lead, he wrote: “To make ‘confusion worse confounded,’ the men who work for the two companies located claims immediately after the discovery of the cross vein covering nearly the whole of it, as it was not the lead claimed by the original companies.”<sup>20</sup> That observation supports Mark Twain’s story in a general way. Also it suggests that others, as well as the three partners, may have scrambled for a piece of the pie, only to be legally outmatched somehow by Johnson and the Pride of Utah.

Was Clemens’ financial loss as great as he represented it? He claimed in *Roughing It* “that I was absolutely and unquestionably worth a million dollars, once, for ten days” (*RI*, p. 264); and two years earlier he had put the loss at “a half million dollars.”<sup>21</sup> Probably the actual loss was substantial, but by no means as great as Clemens asserted. Had the partners retained and developed their blind lead, they would have needed investment capital, and expensive equipment and legal disputes might well have drained their resources. Still, Clemens conceivably might have made a small fortune by selling out his entire interest at the proper time. He recorded in *Roughing It* that his erstwhile partner A. D. Allen, owner of 100 shares of consolidated Johnson and Wide West (really Pride of Utah) stock, “apprehending tiresome litigation, and considering such a huge concern unwieldy, had sold his hundred feet for ninety thousand dollars in gold and gone home to the States to enjoy it” (*RI*, p. 264).<sup>22</sup> This amount, Clemens asserted, was much less

than the amount his 200 shares in the partners' blind lead company would have realized by outright sale. His assertion carries weight: although bullion production figures for the Johnson are unknown, the richness of the mine's ore is beyond question.<sup>23</sup>

It may be asked whether Mark Twain's substitution of one mine's name for another is important? The answer is Yes, if we wish to better understand the interplay of historical truth, personal experience, and imaginative power in *Roughing It*. Mark Twain's tale of the blind lead, as we have seen, deviates from the ascertainable facts in one major and several minor respects. Probably the deviation was intentional, made in order to achieve narrative simplicity and dramatic impact. Probably, too, the episode as written magnifies the humorous interplay that occurred between the narrator and Higbie, millionaires for a day, as they build their dream castles and plan their European tours. But by and large, in recording the main event, the acquisition and loss of the blind lead claim, Mark Twain stuck to the facts. Well after the shockwaves from his loss had subsided, Clemens wrote to Orion on July 23, 1862: "No, I don't own a foot in the 'Johnson' ledge—I will tell the story some day in a more intelligible manner."<sup>24</sup> In *Roughing It*, he did. Intelligible, closely crafted, humorously dramatic, and manipulated in several ways for literary effect, it is nonetheless essentially accurate—as he wrote, "a true story."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Roughing It*, ed. Franklin R. Rogers and Paul Baender (Berkeley, 1972), p. 255. Further quotations from *Roughing It* are documented in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The Wide West claim was located in 1860, and the Wide West Mining Company was incorporated in California on January 17, 1861, with capital stock of 2,400 shares valued at \$600,000. By the fall of 1861, ore from the mine reportedly yielded \$140 per ton.

<sup>3</sup> *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, 2 vols., ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York, 1924), 2: pp. 253-254. Hereafter cited in the text as *MTA*.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Phillips, "Mark Twain's Partner," *Saturday Evening Post* 193 (Sept. 11, 1920), 70.

<sup>5</sup> "The Esmeralda Mines," *San Francisco Daily Herald and Mirror*, June 12, 1861, 1.

<sup>6</sup> W. M. Bunker, *Report upon the Aurora Mining District, Esmeralda Co., Nevada* (San Francisco, 1879), pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Clemens to Orion Clemens, June 9, 1862, Vassar College.

<sup>8</sup> Clemens to Orion Clemens, June 22, 1862, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>9</sup> The San Francisco capitalist J. W. Tucker revealed on January 15, 1863, that the Wide West owned 52% of the Dimes ("A 'Pioneer' Mining Shark!," *San Francisco Alta California*, Jan. 16, 1863, 2).

<sup>10</sup> "Esmeralda Correspondence," *Sacramento Daily Bee*, July 3, 1862, 1.

<sup>11</sup> "Late from Washoe," *Sacramento Daily Union*, July 22, 1863, 2, from the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, July 20, 1862. This piece is unsigned, but Clemens' personal letters of the period show him to have been the Aurora correspondent (and the author of the lost "Josh" letters) for the *Enterprise* at this time. The verve and phrasing of the report—see the quotation later on in the text—also indicate his authorship.

<sup>12</sup> "The Esmeralda Mines," *San Francisco Alta California*, Dec. 27, 1862, 1, from the *Esmeralda Star*, Dec. 20, 1862.

<sup>13</sup> "Late from Washoe," 2.

<sup>14</sup> "Mono County Correspondence," *Sacramento Daily Bee*, July 12, 1862, 3; "Our Letter from Esmeralda, Mono Co.," *San Francisco Alta California*, Nov. 18, 1862, 1. Just prior to the consolidation, "E.F.G.," the Aurora correspondent of the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, noted the proximity of the four ledges: "The famous rival lodes, Wide West, Pride of Utah, Johnson, and Dimes, are located there [Last Chance Hill]; and the shafts and tunnels of each are but a few feet apart" ("A Sketch of Things in the Esmeralda Region," Nov. 12, 1862, 3, dated Aurora, Nov. 7, 1862).

<sup>15</sup> Although Mark Twain substituted the Wide West for the Pride of Utah in *Roughing It*, evidently both he and Higbie (in his reminiscences) accurately identified A. D. Allen as foreman of the Wide West (and not of the Pride of Utah). On May 31, 1862, the reporter for the *Esmeralda Star*, while touring the interior of the Wide West, named Allen as the man "who is working the ledge" and who guided him down the incline to the place where the "decomposed quartz" was being mined (Quoted in Effie Mona Mack, *Mark Twain in Nevada* [New York: Scribner's, 1947], p. 165).

<sup>16</sup> Mining deeds, Mono County Archives, Book E, p. 44, Bridgeport, California, courtesy of Michael E. Marleau.

<sup>17</sup> *Mining Laws of Esmeralda District, Mono County, California, from August 30th, 1860, to July 1st, 1864* (San Francisco, 1863), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Clemens to Orion Clemens, July 9, 1862, Mark Twain Project, Berkeley.

<sup>19</sup> "Late from Washoe," 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Mono County Correspondence," 3.

<sup>21</sup> "Around the World. Letter No. 6. 'Early Days' in Nevada. Silver Land Nabobs," *Buffalo Express*, Jan. 8, 1870, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> In his "Around the World" letter No. 6 (see note 21), Clemens called Allen his "sensible" partner, "still worth a hundred thousand dollars or so—he never lost his wits." A report by "Sahab," written from Aurora, on January 24, 1863, appears to support the truth of Clemens' account of Allen's financial killing. Sahab named Allen as one of Aurora's few "wealthy . . . men of means," who had acquired their money by making "sure to sell stock in claims which have long since been given up by poor miners" ("The Esmeralda Region," *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 3, 1863, 1).

<sup>23</sup> W. M. Bunker's 1879 *Report* establishes that the ore in occasional pillars of rock "left to sustain the walls" of the Johnson chamber assayed "as high as \$10,000 per ton" (p. 13).

<sup>24</sup> Clemens to Orion Clemens, July 23, 1862, Vassar College.

## *The Literary Journalism of Dan De Quille*

LAWRENCE I. BERKOVE

DAN DE QUILLE DESERVES BETTER than the near oblivion he currently suffers in American literature circles. He is not included in the "American Newspaper Journalists: 1873-1900" volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*,<sup>1</sup> and Frank L. Mott dismisses him without a mention.<sup>2</sup> Except for a small flurry of interest in him in the 1940s, and a very few publications since then, he has survived chiefly as a name to be routinely mentioned in lists of people associated with Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, or western journalism of the late nineteenth century.

Yet De Quille was highly regarded in his own day by all those who knew him: the mining magnates of the Comstock (especially John Mackay<sup>3</sup>) and all his colleagues on the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, including Mark Twain. And some of his contemporaries even thought him a better writer than Twain. With hindsight, we know that this latter opinion was extravagant. In fact, the inevitable comparison of De Quille with Twain is probably one of the causes of his present obscurity, for De Quille at his best is clearly no match for Twain at his best. By the time Twain developed into one of America's major authors, his literary productions completely overshadowed even his own early journalism, let alone the work of all of his fellow western writers. If, however, De Quille is compared to the local color authors who created and shaped the material and traditions of American folk literature and the tall tale, then he shows up very favorably.

"Dan De Quille" was the pen name of William Wright. He was born in Ohio in 1829, and remained there for eighteen years until he moved with his family to a homestead in Iowa. He married in 1853, and fathered five children two of whom died in infancy, before he left Iowa by himself in 1857, to make his fortune in California. He prospected there until 1859, then moved to the Lake Tahoe region of Nevada, where he tried his luck at mining for another three years. In 1862, he joined the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, soon to become one of the liveliest and most renowned newspapers of the West, and he remained with it until it suspended publication in 1893.

Most of De Quille's regular journalism was factual, concerned with the daily affairs of Virginia City and the Comstock. Not infrequently, however, his columns reflected his keen interest in the history and social character of the Comstock, and they often reflected his humor. Even before he met Mark



Dan De Quille (William Wright) June, 1881. (Nevada Historical Society.)

Twain he was known for his “quaints,” humorous accounts of personalities and events real or imaginary, and for his hoaxes. Although De Quille later concentrated much of his factual knowledge of the Comstock into several books and articles, his most memorable book, *The Big Bonanza* (1876), discursively alternates between history, technical information, social commentary, and memoir, occasionally leavened with some good-natured exaggeration and Comstock legend. It is not always possible to be sure when he is being factual and when he is being playfully imaginative; part of the book’s charm is the delightful way he shades from one into the other.



John Mackay, Comstock mining magnate and good friend of De Quille. (Nevada Historical Society.)

This capacity of De Quille to pass beyond routine, reportorial journalism and to write more freely and creatively—what I would call literary journalism—is, paradoxically, the most permanently interesting feature of his writing but also the least well known. It is surprising that more effort has not been directed toward collecting his sketches, both fictional and non-fictional, and his short stories. That many remain to be found is suggested by eleven

hitherto forgotten articles by De Quille that I have located. They are of uneven quality, but even the slightest is graced by some of the picturesque writing and gentle geniality that is the mint mark of his work. De Quille was no rough amateur but an experienced professional, an exceptionally perceptive observer who saw a great deal of a vivid era and recorded it with wit and skill.

It should be recognized at the outset that De Quille had literary aspirations. Richard G. Lillard discovered that in addition to his regular work for the *Enterprise*, De Quille also contributed to seven San Francisco periodicals: the newspapers the *Bulletin*, *Chronicle*, and *Examiner*; and the literary journals *Argonaut*, *San Franciscan*, *Overland Monthly*, and *Californian Illustrated Magazine*. Lillard also listed contributions to two other newspapers: the *Nevada Monthly* and the Cedar Falls (Iowa) *Gazette*.<sup>4</sup> Lillard further established that "between November 18, 1860, and September 4, 1864, alone, more than sixty-five items of his, special articles and 'exchanges' from the *Enterprise*, appeared in the *Golden Era*."

I can now expand this list considerably. De Quille contributed hundreds of essays, sketches, and stories over his lifetime to at least thirty periodicals from coast to coast, including prolonged, regular, and major contributions to the Carson City *Free Lance* and the Salt Lake City *Tribune*. Although De Quille's contributions to other periodicals began before he joined the *Enterprise*, the amount of free lancing he did increased over the years to the point that one begins to wonder how much time he spent at his regular job. By far the most of this large body of material was either humor or fiction.

For a writer who enjoyed great respect and popularity throughout the mining West in his own time, who is still remembered in Nevada as one of its finest authors, and whose *Big Bonanza* remains the classic contemporary history of the Comstock Lode, there is astonishing little information about his life and writing career. No biography of De Quille exists; what we know of him comes largely from such indirect sources as memoirs, histories of Nevada, and his own accounts of contacts with famous individuals. Next to nothing is known about him after the publication of *The Big Bonanza*. Much of his journalism has been lost due to the destruction of back files of the *Enterprise*, and little of what is left has been republished, with the exception of two articles by C. Grant Loomis, in which are collected some excellent tall tales and other examples of high-spirited humor, mostly from De Quille's early career.<sup>5</sup>

The picture is not all bleak, however. The loss of the *Enterprise* files does not affect what De Quille published elsewhere. De Quille saved much of the fiction and humor he wrote for the *Enterprise*, reworked it, and republished it in other periodicals in his later years. Thus, some of his best and most interesting writing is yet to be relocated, collected, and republished. In 1980, James J. Rawls published some manuscript versions of "sketches (humorous



Basement of the *Territorial Enterprise*, Virginia City, Nevada, c. 1880. (Nevada Historical Society.)

View of Virginia City, Nevada



Virginia City, Nevada, 1875. (Nevada Historical Society.)

and otherwise), burlesques and full-blown short stories" composed between the late 1860s and the early 1890s, including substantial and historically significant accounts of pioneer life in California and of an Indian prophet.<sup>6</sup> Now, the discovery of these eleven additional De Quille articles is additional proof of his activity after *The Big Bonanza*. Although a sample from only a four-year period in the 1880s, these works represent the creative vitality which De Quille possessed until the end of his life, and which animated him to continuously revise existing material or produce new work.

The first and slightest of the eleven articles is a short piece entitled "Done Cotch Him!" that was published in *The Wasp* on November 14, 1885. It consists entirely of a comic dialogue between two uneducated blacks, a situation that was popular in the minstrel shows of the time. The man called Julius had invested some money in an ill-fated stock venture but describes his efforts to catch an unwary buyer in such figurative language that his friend Cyrus forgets that they are discussing securities and instead mentally visualizes a trap for a rabbit.

"Hush! As I approach de trap my heart go pit-a-pat. 'Got him dis time, shuah!' says I to myself. 'Got him fas' an' tight! an' bets my life w'en I claps my claws on him dar'll be no moah dese gittin's away. He may kick and he may squeal, an' he may roll his eye-balls, but I'll hole my grip!'"

"Dar he was, Julius!" cried the excited Cyrus, whose imagination had so far led him astray that at the moment the only thing that protruded above the general chaos of his mind was rabbit. "Dar he was, fas' an' close, an' you tuck him out an' biff him on de back of de neck wif yo' right han' while you hole his hine legs wif de lef!"

The humor of the piece depends upon extensive back-and-forth shifting between literal and figurative meaning, with Cyrus anticipating being invited to a meal and Julius, frustrated at the end, referring to the death of his hopes as a "corpse."

The piece is not distinctive De Quille; it could have been written by many other writers, and not necessarily distinguished ones at that. It does show, however, De Quille's competent rendition of vernacular, and it is clear evidence of his awareness of the literary market. *The Wasp* at that time was a prestigious magazine, edited by Ambrose Bierce. That fact has some incidental value as literary history in establishing that Bierce and De Quille were aware of each other's work. In fact, De Quille shared a page with Bierce, who printed one of his own self-indulgent "Little Johnny" sketches alongside. Both authors were, of course, capable of much better work and had been producing it for some years, but this kind of writing was quite popular among readers. It appears that both authors, besides making money, were taking care to cultivate as large a reading audience for their works as possible.

It is possible, although speculative, that the sketch may also reflect an influence of *Huckleberry Finn*, which had been published earlier that year. In chapter 8 of the novel, Jim loses money in a "stock" venture, which he understands literally to mean only livestock. De Quille's piece parallels the

episode just closely enough to raise the question and to encourage further speculation about whether De Quille might not have hoped to imitate his friend Mark Twain's success in the writing of fiction.

The next ten articles all appeared in the San Francisco *Examiner* between November 1887, and April 1888. These dates are significant. William Randolph Hearst, Jr. had acquired the *Examiner* in March of 1887, and immediately began pouring money into it to make it one of the outstanding newspapers of the country. He quickly attracted some of the finest editorial and writing talent on the west coast. One of the new editors was Arthur McEwen, a former editor of the Virginia City *Evening Chronicle*. Although the *Evening Chronicle* was a competitor of the *Enterprise*, McEwen was an admirer of De Quille. Even as late as 1893, he observed that De Quille and Twain were "about equally good in the sort of invention" required for composing imaginative writing but that "Dan very often did the better work."<sup>7</sup> Thus, De Quille likely had an entrée into the lucrative new market of the *Examiner* and obviously pursued it once assured that his contributions would be welcomed.

All of De Quille's *Examiner* articles were written for the Sunday supplement, a truly remarkable feature section. It typically consisted entirely of heavily illustrated feature material: opinion articles and fiction by writers of international, as well as local reputation; "factual" reports on topics as widely ranging as new scientific discoveries, history, travel, and ghosts; comics; song scores; and society columns. Very probably, its eclectic character derived from Hearst's wish to embrace all classes of readers, but, by the same token, there were always interesting things in the section, and De Quille was in the company of greater as well as lesser writers than he.

His first contribution, on November 27, 1887, was entitled "A Haunted Mine." It vividly relates some miners' accounts of supernatural disturbances of the Yellow Jacket Mine of Gold Hill, Nevada. In contrast to his equally vivid but skeptical narrative of "Ghost-Haunted Shafts" in chapter 45 of *The Big Bonanza*, this piece appears to treat seriously the possibility that the mine might actually be haunted: "In writing an account of these old haunted levels, it would not have been difficult to have invented some startling things, but I have preferred relating just what is reported by Mr. Bennett and the miners themselves. Without comment or any attempt at explanation I give the story of this supposed-to-be haunted mine, leaving all to draw their own conclusions."

It is unlikely that De Quille had become more superstitious over the passage of years. A simpler explanation is that he was probably responding to a perceived market. Anyone who has looked over many late nineteenth century periodicals, newspapers as well as magazines, must have noticed numerous articles on psychic phenomena. Ghost stories were popular and, in fact, were being written by such well-known authors as Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and even Henry James.

A second *Examiner* article, entitled "A Brave Knocked Out," appeared on

December 18, 1887. Although it purports to be historical, it is more probably fiction embellished with a little bit of authentic local color. The setting of the story is a wagon train encampment near Dayton, Nevada. An Indian brave steals a bottle of ammonia from one of the pioneer women, thinking it some sort of potent medicine, and swigs it. The humor is sophomoric, peaking in the brave's rueful punchline, "Heap-a big medicine, all same two shotgun!" The story is typical of many similar anecdotes that were common in the periodicals of this time.

On January 29, 1888, appeared a far better piece, the sort of narrative rich in interesting detail that only De Quille at his best could write. Entitled "Death Valley/The Strange Region Known as the American Thirstland," it unforgettably dramatizes the significance of the name, Death Valley. The tale begins factually with a short overview of the area's terrain and geological origins and then artfully sets the tone for what is to follow by a suggestive description of the fantastic weather phenomena that appear in that arid atmosphere:

These regions are the home of the delusive mirage and of tall revolving pillars of sand that to the number of half a dozen at a time are often seen waltzing solemnly to and fro over the level wastes. They make their appearance every afternoon in certain places, as if forming for a cotillion, and, unbroken, for hours slowly weave back and forth around one another. These sand pillars tower almost to the clouds—a grand and striking feature of the deserts. In watching their stately and apparently intelligent movements, one is almost inclined to believe with the Indians that they are ghosts of giants that lived in the days when the dead seas were alive, or to set them down as being genii of the deserts partaking of the nature of that gigantic genius who was released from the jar by the old fisherman, as related in the "Arabian Nights."

The story's mood having been set, De Quille leads into a haunting account of the grim humor inspired in prospectors by Death Valley. The account appears to be autobiographical, but one cannot be certain that it is. De Quille was a master of the art of verisimilitude—an aspect of that quality of "invention" which McEwen had praised—and used it so skillfully that only a detailed knowledge of his biography would enable a reader to separate fact from fiction.

As De Quille tells it, he once, in company with three or four friends, was on a wild goose chase near Death Valley seeking a legendary lost Spanish mine. Suffering terribly from thirst, they suddenly came upon a trail: "It made directly up a narrow, rocky ravine where were seen some green and waving bushes. Up that ravine must be a spring. The green foliage denoted it, and the branch trail could only mean that up there beside the big rocks and waving bushes was a fountain of living water. Behold, too, standing hitched by the thicket of green, a horse." But when they drew closer to the ravine they discovered that the horse was dead and that they had been deluded.

"Dead! The horse dead!" was the cry as we all moved forward to take a square look. "Dead as a door-nail!" said Campbell. And dead he was, sure enough, as we could

all now plainly see, being but a rod away from where the beast stood. It was but the mere mummy of a horse—the skin and bones of a horse. Every rib could be counted, the tail was almost hairless and the eye-sockets were empty. But there the animal stood firmly braced on his bony legs and his halter tied to a bush. In his mouth, which was partly open and showed the projecting teeth, was a bunch of sagebrush. The bushes we had seen were mesquit, which grows on the highest and driest sand-knolls in the country, luring many a pilgrim from his path by its greenness.

“Some devil’s crew that passed this way,” said Campbell, “set that skeleton up in that way; tied him to the tree and put the brush in his mouth on purpose to fool people into coming up here in the expectation of finding a spring. Whew! the place is dry as a lime-kiln!”

The group’s surprises were not over, however; a few paces away was a human mummy, jauntily dressed and resting on a weather-beaten saddle. “The skin of the face was so drawn and puckered as to expose the teeth, giving to the visage an expression of devilish glee and cunning. The mummy seemed grinning at us as if gratified at having succeeded in fooling us up the ravine.”

It was later learned that area prospectors had been familiar with the grisly tableau for many years but, appreciating its grim humor, had left it in place. De Quille concludes this sketch of Death Valley and its evocative mirages by memorably associating the tableau with “a voice from the tombs”:

As I am now so you must be;  
Prepare for death and follow me.

The article of February 5, 1888, is much less dramatic but has some historical interest. Entitled “Isthmian Sports,” it appears to be an engaging bit of autobiography deriving from an October, 1863 stopover at Aspinwall, then the Atlantic port in what is now the Canal Zone. Travel articles and recollections of west coast history such as this were occasional features in the *Examiner* supplement. As with the previous piece, the degree of its authenticity is uncertain. We do know, however, that De Quille left Virginia City in December, 1862, and was absent for nine months “on the Plains and in the States,” and that he returned to San Francisco by boat just as the great Virginia City fire and riot of August 28, 1863, had been brought under control.<sup>8</sup> Although there is some discrepancy between the October date of “Isthmian Sports” and chronological fact, the article does suggest that De Quille returned to California via the Panamanian isthmus instead of the overland route. A rare account of isthmian life in pre-canal days, “Isthmian Sports” likely reflects at least some personal knowledge of the place.

Three weeks later, on February 26, De Quille published an article simply entitled “Artemus Ward.” This is an earlier and shorter version of “Artemus Ward in Nevada,” now a standard source work, which he published in 1893. These two versions of the same essay have implication for De Quille scholarship. First, by showing that he made the effort to revise material for republication, they demonstrate that De Quille had literary aspirations.

Second, inasmuch as the second version, along with two other essays (one on the demise of the *Enterprise* and the other on Mark Twain), was written after the *Enterprise* was closed in 1893,<sup>9</sup> this is additional evidence that De Quille attempted to continue to earn his living by writing feature essays.

The frequency of De Quille's contributions to the *Examiner* in 1888, testifies both to the fact that he had successfully penetrated a desirable market and to his prolificacy as a writer. There is no sign of carelessness in the composition of these pieces, which he must have written in time spared from his *Enterprise* duties. He obviously had a rich fund of story ideas as well as a knack for narration.

"Wind Puddings," "A Female World-Ranger," and "Spoker's Serenade," the first two both published on March 11, and the third on March 25, are three fictional vignettes in a gently satiric vein. The first deals with a hungry and shivering tramp who one winter morning asks a Mrs. O'Dowd for "a cold snack of some kind." Mrs. O'Dowd's ready sympathy inspires the tramp to invent a progressively embellished fib about his former status. She in turn responds to each new detail by progressively suggesting first a cold snack, then a warm meal, and finally a feast worthy of him—oysters and quail on toast—asking only that he wait half an hour until her husband returns from work and buys the food. The self-styled "near relative" of the Astors and Vanderbilts pushes his luck too far, however, when he begs her for something immediately:

"But, consider, my dear woman; I'm almost starved, so for heaven's sake be quick! Give me the cold potatoes and the buttermilk and I'll be off."

"Cowl'd pertaties and butthermilk, indade! Cowl'd pertaties and butthermilk for an Asthor? May the devil take ye and fly away wid ye to be beggin' for cowl'd pertaties and butthermilk! Ye're no thrue Asthor—ye're but a common thramp! Be off wid ye, ye blaggard! Would I be wastin' cowl'd pertaties and butthermilk on the loikes of you?"

A strange kind of justice operates in the story through the irony of the tramp's pretenses being balanced by Mrs. O'Dowd's illogic. Perhaps coincidentally, two weeks later, the *Examiner* printed a story of how a reporter disguised as a beggar was invited into an Irish woman's home for a dinner but was also expelled hungry when she abruptly and arbitrarily changed her mind.<sup>10</sup> This story was less intricate than De Quille's; thus did fact imitate fiction.

"A Female World-Ranger" portrays an officious woman traveller who intimidates every passenger in her railroad car with her knowledge of the world in general and trains in particular, but who is so busy impressing everybody that she misses her stop. De Quille picturesquely describes her talk as "like the snapping of corn in a popper." One memorable example of how she squelches conversation occurs as she intrudes into a discussion by some male travellers of railroad speed records: "Gentlemen," said she, "the fastest

railroad time ever made was one mile in 50¼ seconds; three miles in two minutes and 36¼ seconds, and five miles in four minutes and 50 seconds. That time was made between West Philadelphia and Jersey City, September 4, 1879, Edward Osmond, engineer." There is no "moral" to this tale, but it has the completeness of a genre painting.

"Spoker's Serenade" describes a practical joke a wife plays on her husband, who drinks too much. When Mr. Spoker comes home one night with two cronies—all drunk—and tries to placate his wife by serenading her, she sends out a colored woman to pretend that he has come to the wrong house. The ensuing comedy of confusion and embarrassment does not end Spoker's drinking habits, but it does break him of serenades.

In "Rev. Olympus Jump/The Mountain Howitzer of God and His Good Works," published on April 1,<sup>11</sup> De Quille indirectly suggests his own religious sentiments by his implied sympathy with the title character. The story is set in a Comstock saloon, where some old-timers recollect a vigorous and roughly eloquent preacher. Each speaker successively elaborates the same theme, a contrast of the old-fashioned sincere, clear, and direct preachers like Olympus Jump with the "new-fangled" clergymen, the "highly eddicated, rose-water, butter-mouthed sort." The miners' mixed metaphorical praise of Rev. Jump is rich in mining lingo:

"He was a miner of the word afore the Lord, Olympus was. He'd 'drifted' and 'creviced' all through the Bible, from the 'grass-roots' down to the 'bedrock,' pannin' out bushels of 'chispas' [Spanish for sparkles, i.e. gold flakes] and scores and scores of big 'nuggets' of pure gold. With these he was loaded clean up to the muzzle, an' when he turned loose and began to fire scriptur into an aujence he might'er been called the mountain howitzer of God

"Olympus Jump wasn't one of the kind to be afeerd; he wasn't one of yer skeery sort. He was bold as a lion in the strength of the Lord. He'd pan out and size up the man of thousands as quick as he would a faro-dealer or a monte sharp. When he went forth to labor in the Lord's diggins he spit on his hands and at every lick sent his gospel-pick clean down to the bedrock of rascality and sin. He didn't sneak round behind and fire into sin at long range. He'd weigh out a feller's 'dust' for him right before his eyes. If he found even the 'color' of gold he'd give full credit for it, but if he raked over the 'black sand' and saw 'nary color' away went the whole batch into the 'waste dump' of perdition. No bones about it!"

Mark Twain, of course, had earlier trod this path in chapter 47 of *Roughing It*, where Scotty Briggs became a Sunday-school teacher who told Bible stories to his students in language "riddled with slang," but which they understood. "Rev. Olympus Jump" is in that same tradition, and though less ingenious, it nevertheless shows skill and shares Twain's preference for rough sincerity over pretentious grandiloquence.

The last of these eleven pieces, published on April 22,<sup>12</sup> is "A Goblin Frog," a clever and charming new-minted legend of how the Comstock was discovered. Basing his tale on the character of Peter O'Riley, one of the

historical discoverers of the Comstock and a personage he treats factually in chapter 11 of *The Big Bonanza*, De Quille invented an apocryphal story that took advantage of the fact that O'Riley was notoriously superstitious. In "A Goblin Frog," O'Riley finds gold in a canyon a few miles away from the future Comstock site. Just as he prepares to pan out his sand, he hears a frog piping out "Struck it? Struck it?" When O'Riley starts panning, there is no gold. This sequence of events continues some time until it occurs to O'Riley that the frog is really a devilish goblin who is charming the gold out of his pan. He fails, after exhaustive efforts, to kill the frog or drive it away, and races back agitatedly to camp:

"I'll niver sthrike pick until this canyon again!" cried he. "That imp o' the divil is still there on me claim! I was but jist liftin' me second pan of dirt whin he raised his head from the water and says: 'Pate, have ye sthrucc it?' sez he. 'May the divil bless me,' says I, 'if ye can't have the whole bloody canyon; I'll niver sthrike pick until it again.' No more I will. That frog is no human frog—it's a child o' hell!"

Pete O'Riley kept his word; he at once "pulled up stakes" in Gold Canyon. He struck out for Six-Mile Canyon, five miles to the northward. Taking Pat McLaughlin for a partner, the two began mining at the head of the canyon, where Virginia City now stands, and there the pair presently "struck it"—struck the great Comstock silver lode, the hidden treasure-house of the gnomes and the wonder of the whole mining world. But for the "goblin frog" O'Riley would probably have continued mining in Gold Canyon and to this day the Comstock and the "Big Bonanza" might have remained undiscovered. But for that frog the names of Mackay, Fair and a score of other mining millionaires would not now be known throughout the world.

This sample of De Quille's literary journalism from 1885 to 1888, is only a fraction of his free-lance contributions during those years and a much smaller fraction of his total free-lance output in the second half of his career. The greatest part of his literary journalism represents an unassessed "mining" of the legends and lore of the pioneer era of the Nevada-California border region, a process he began in his early career in a more limited way. The later works are also particularly interesting for their relevance to De Quille's career, for they prove that long before the demise of the *Enterprise* he was already seeking income away from Virginia City and using his skill and versatility with literary form as a means to gain entrance to outside markets and establish himself as an independent author.

De Quille is himself a considerable silver lode well worth prospecting. Our best western writers: Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and Jack London, perfected traditions and techniques that had already been invented and shaped before them. Dan De Quille exemplifies that earlier stage of literary development. Fecund though he was in imagination, he never fully exploited the tremendous resources of information and lore stored in his memory. But he at least began processing the rough material into literature, and though we may have to hunt to rediscover it, it appears that the legacy he left us amounts to a good fortune.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Perry J. Ashley, ed. *American Newspaper Journalists: 1873-1900*, vol. 23 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> John Mackay, to whom the book is dedicated, sponsored *The Big Bonanza* and later allocated De Quille a pension. Oscar Lewis, "Introduction," *The Big Bonanza* (New York: Crowell, 1947), pp. xiii, xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Richard G. Lillard, "Dan De Quille, Comstock Reporter and Humorist," *Pacific Historical Review*, 13 (1944), 251.

<sup>5</sup> C. Grant Lewis, "The Tall Tales of Dan De Quille," *California Folklore Quarterly*, 5 (January 1966), 26-71; "Dan De Quille's Mark Twain," *Pacific Historical Review*, 15 (September 1946), 336-47. For critical assistance in locating additional *Enterprise* material I am especially indebted to Eric Moody of the Nevada Historical Society and to the staff of the University of Nevada-Reno Library.

<sup>6</sup> Dan De Quille, *Dan De Quille of The Big Bonanza*, ed. James J. Rawls (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur McEwen, "Heroic Days on the Comstock," in *The Life and Times of the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, ed. and intro. by Oscar Lewis (Ashland: Lewis Osborne, 1971), p. 35. This same sentiment was expressed by a number of other Comstock journalists familiar with both Twain and De Quille, including Joe Goodman.

<sup>8</sup> De Quille's account of his departure from, and return to, Virginia City can be found in his memoir, "Reporting with Mark Twain," *California Illustrated Magazine*, 4 (July, 1893), pp. 170-71. A description of the fire and riot can be found in Grant H. Smith, "The History of the Comstock Lode: 1850-1920," *University of Nevada Bulletin*, 37, No. 3 (July 1, 1943), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Four articles De Quille wrote in 1893, after the *Territorial Enterprise* ceased publication, are exceptions to the oblivion suffered by most of his later writings. His famous article on "Artemus Ward in Nevada" was published in the *Californian Illustrated Magazine*, 4 (August 1893), pp. 403-6. "Reporting with Mark Twain" was published in the July issue of the same magazine, pp. 170-78. Scholars have been aware of these articles from the first. Two important memoirs he wrote for the *San Francisco Examiner* have recently been rediscovered: "The Story of the *Enterprise*," originally published on January 24, 1893, and "Salad Days of Mark Twain," originally published on March 19, 1893. They were both republished by Oscar Lewis in *The Life and Times of the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* (Ashland: Lewis Osborne, 1971), pp. 5-10, 37-52. See also Lawrence Berkove's introduction to "A Neglected Memoir of Mark Twain," *Quarterly News-Letter*, 46, No. 2 (Spring 1981), 31-47.

<sup>10</sup> "Beggars for a Day/The Adventures of One Who Asked/Alms from Door to Door," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 25, 1888, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> An earlier, shorter, and less developed version of this sketch was published in the *Enterprise* on August 27, 1877.

<sup>12</sup> "The Goblin Frog" first appeared in the *Enterprise* in a slightly different version on January 30, 1876.

# *The Plains, Parkman, and The Oregon Trail*

ROBERT THACKER

WHEN HE HEADED onto the plains in 1846, Francis Parkman was newly-graduated from Harvard and had written none of the volumes on which his reputation now rests. He and his cousin Quincy Adams Shaw traveled west that spring mainly for adventure, for the joy of a summer spent “out of bounds,” so a holiday air permeates *The Oregon Trail* (1849). Mason Wade, Bernard De Voto, and others have lamented Parkman’s very inexperience in 1846—during his travels he saw first-hand many of the important players of the westward movement at a crucial time and was himself among the emigrants on the Oregon Trail; but because of his youth, they claim, he did not recognize what he was looking at. He was, however, most “experienced” in another way: he was well acquainted with contemporary writing about the west. Prior to the trip Parkman had read Josiah Gregg’s *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844), Maximilian’s *Travels* (1843) and Fremont’s writings. He had seen George Catlin’s paintings in London, read his *Letters and Notes* (1841), and was familiar with all of Irving’s western works. Perhaps most importantly, he knew Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels “by heart” and could quote Bryant’s western poems from memory.<sup>1</sup>

As his reading suggests, Parkman was among the first travelers to venture into the plains carrying literary baggage, as it were. Unlike Bryant or Irving, who preceded him during the 1830s, Parkman the literary traveler went west equipped with some notion of what he would find there, based on the experiences and imaginative renderings of others, and he did so in part to test what he had read. Though quite literate—before turning to his histories Parkman wrote not only *The Oregon Trail*, but also a critical essay on Cooper and *Vassal Morton* (1856), a novel—his notions of conventions and forms were, in contrast to Bryant and Irving’s (both considerably older men at the time of their travels) less inculcated. Thus Parkman’s sense of the west, on setting out, was both more knowledgeable, and, because of his youth, fresher than either of his literary predecessors.

Parkman left two records of his trip: a daily journal, written while traveling, and *The Oregon Trail*. Read in tandem, these two texts define the imaginative experience of the trip, since one offers on-the-spot experience while the other gives a more considered, thoughtful view. Together, they show



A wagon train on the Oregon Trail in Kansas. (Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.)

Parkman's transformation; despite his reading, he was not prepared for what he saw and felt. The west forced on Parkman the same imaginative change seen in numerous Great Plains travelers, both before and after. Parkman's singularity lies with his expectations—based on his readings—and on his literary bent. *The Oregon Trail* records a western shift, if you will, in descriptive and aesthetic conventions—through it, Parkman's imagination moves west. This shift is best seen in his reactions to the plains landscape and, accordingly, will serve as my focus here. Indeed, Parkman's struggle to define his ambivalent reactions to western landscape lies at the very heart of *The Oregon Trail*.<sup>2</sup>

Parkman and his party left Westport, Missouri, in early May of 1846, and traveled up the Platte River to Fort Laramie; they then traveled south along the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains before turning east and following the Arkansas River back to the settlements, returning in late September to the Westport area. Parkman first caught sight of the prairie just outside of Westport. As he recorded in his journal, "We had a sight of the great green ocean of the prairies; for the forest terminates at this place, where also is the boundary of the State of Missouri. A lofty forest, all fresh and verdant in the spring—then a tract of shrubbery and crabtrees full of fragrant blossoms—and

then the great level expanse of prairie."<sup>3</sup> In *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman's rendering of the same description places a greater emphasis on the visual: "Looking over an intervening belt of bushes, we saw the green, ocean-like expanse of prairie, stretching swell beyond swell to the horizon" (p. 10). This description also emphasizes the spreading vastness of the prairie, but, after describing the blossoming trees, he interjects a new element: "I was half inclined to regret leaving behind the land of gardens, for the rude and stern scenes of the prairie and mountains" (p. 10). Implicitly, Parkman is equating the settlements and forests of the East with "gardens"—the tamed and the known—while the prairie is a strange new landscape—wild, untamed, and unknown. This was, in fact, its aspect for Parkman, but by interjecting this consideration—a longing to stay—he is preparing his reader for what lies ahead on the trail.

Such is the usual technique to be found when passages in *The Oregon Trail* are compared to their precursors in Parkman's journals. He often took the germ of an idea in the journals and, through elaboration, explanation, and amplification, produced in the book a passage which is far more detailed and articulate. These passages, too, often take on a larger structural significance within the whole of *The Oregon Trail*.

Writing in his journal some two weeks after leaving Westport, Parkman notes that "the expanse of prairie stretched for mile after mile without tree or bush—we ascended swell after swell and could see nothing but the vast, green level. At last, turned aside from the road to a clump of trees in the distance" (*Journals*, II: 424). This observation is quite similar to other contemporary descriptions of the trans-Mississippi west, but, when writing the book which became *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman seized upon this descriptive passage as his occasion for the parallel consideration of the real prairie versus its literary reputation. Thus he writes in a protracted preliminary to the passage just quoted:

Should any one of my readers ever be impelled to visit the prairies, and should he choose the route of the Platte (the best, perhaps, that can be adopted), I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination. A dreary preliminary, a protracted crossing of the threshold, awaits him before he finds himself fairly upon the verge of the "great American desert,"—those barren wastes, the haunts of the buffalo and the Indian, where the very shadow of civilization lies a hundred leagues behind him. The intervening country, the wide and fertile belt that extends for several hundred miles beyond the extreme frontier, will probably answer tolerably well to his preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets, and novelists, who have seldom penetrated farther, have derived their conceptions of the whole region. If he has a painter's eye, he may find his period of probation not wholly void of interest. The scenery, though tame, is graceful and pleasing. Here are level plains too wide for the eye to measure; green undulations, like motionless swells of the ocean; abundance of streams, followed through all their windings by lines of woods and scattered groves. (pp. 34-35)



A painting of the Oregon Trail at Marshall's Ferry and Trading Post, Marshall County, Kansas. (Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.)

Because he is writing in retrospect, Parkman knows what lies ahead of this fertile tract of land—the High Plains; when he wrote the entry in his journal he did not. This passage provides the reader with a distillation of Parkman's own experience. Presumably, the "fertile belt" he describes answered his own "preconceived ideas of the prairie," but in retrospect he is aware that those ideas, garnered, no doubt, from his readings and the paintings he had seen, are severely limited. Thus while he understands the aesthetic reaction to the fertile prairies ("If he has a painter's eye"), Parkman is conscious that the aesthetic reaction is only a part of prairie experience. Coupled with it are a variety of more pressing, and elemental, considerations:

But let him be as enthusiastic as he may, he will find enough to damp his ardor. His wagons will stick in the mud; his horses will break loose; harness will give way; and axle-trees prove unsound. His bed will be a soft one, consisting often of black mud of the richest consistency. As for food, he must content himself with biscuit and salt provisions; for strange as it may seem, this tract of country produces very little game. As he advances, indeed, he will see, mouldering in the grass by his path, the vast antlers of the elk, and farther on the whitened skulls of the buffalo, once swarming over this now deserted region. Perhaps, like us, he may journey for a fortnight, and see not so much as the hoof-print of a deer; in the spring, not even a prairie-hen is to be had.

Add to this that, all the morning, the sun beats upon him with a sultry, penetrating

heat, and that, with provoking regularity, at about four o'clock in the afternoon a thunderstorm rises and drenches him to the skin. (pp. 35-36)

Clearly, some of Parkman's romantic expectations—he knew Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, after all, “by heart”—were exploded by the hard edge of the reality he found on the plains. Thus his two views of the landscape, both the preconceived and the actual, are provided as a corrective for his readers. Having read much of what was in print at the time concerning the prairie west, Parkman is clearly conscious that such descriptions provided only a partial picture, partial both in terms of the extent of the travels that these works delineate and partial in their view of the travels.

Like those travelers who preceded him onto the plains, Parkman comments on the strange sights he found. Like them, he notes huge buffalo herds (p. 82), optical illusions (p. 310), the clarity of the air (p. 369), and takes advantage of hilltop views. As noted above, he also used the ubiquitous ocean metaphor to describe the landscape. But the fact that he noticed these elements is not as important for my discussion as his literary use of them in *The Oregon Trail* itself.

Instead of merely applying literary conventions to his immediate observations, as Bryant and Irving did, Parkman questions the very validity of such conventions in describing the West at all. Thus his account of the well-read traveler's expectations and the reality he finds, quoted above, has the effect of providing a context based on earlier writings, and then, through Parkman's own views, suggesting a more appropriate way of seeing the scene, a corrective. By requiring further analysis, the west as a new land enforces conventions of its own. Certainly, the holiday air that infuses the book offers many of the trappings of an adventure romance (Parkman frequently refers to his guide as “another Leatherstocking”), but Parkman's writings most often amplify and embellish sentiments expressed in his journal, and hence improve their clarity.

When Parkman recalled his experiences on the prairie while dictating *The Oregon Trail*, he developed his impressions (as seen in the journal); he made them clearer and more precise. For example, after traveling for several days overland prior to striking the Platte River, Parkman is understandably anxious to reach it; game had been scarce and the travel monotonous, as he writes in his journal: “hour after hour over a perfect level” (*Journals*, II: p. 430). Having traveled a good part of the day with the buttes of the Platte in sight, Parkman records reaching them matter-of-factly in his journal: “and after a long and gradual ascent, saw the Platte from the summit—apparently one vast, level plain, fringed with a distant line of forest—the river ran invisible in sluices through the plain, with here and there a patch of woods like an island” (*Journals*, II: p. 431). Parkman's rendering of the same scene in *The Oregon Trail*, however, is a much more detailed emotional and aesthetic response:



Crossing the Oregon Trail at the Kansas River near old Uniontown. (Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.)

At length we gained the summit, and the long-expected valley of the Platte lay before us. We all drew rein, and sat joyfully looking down upon the prospect. It was right welcome,—strange, too, and striking to the imagination; and yet it had not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness. For league after league, a plain as level as a lake was outspread beneath us; here and there the Platte, divided into a dozen threadlike sluices, was traversing it, and an occasional clump of wood, rising in the midst like a shadowy island, relieved the monotony of the waste. No living thing was moving throughout the vast landscape, except the lizards that darted over the sand and through the rank grass and prickly pears at our feet. (p. 65)

While the journal entry provides the bare bones of the incident, Parkman here recalls his emotional response and analyzes it. He knows that his reaction is both strong and imaginative, but at the same time he is uneasy because he is aware that this particular vista includes none of the conventional “features of grandeur” associated with either beauty or the picturesque. Finally, too, he is aware that his imagination has been struck by a landscape which contains no living things to animate the scene.

Here, then, is the effect of the plains landscape on an author’s imagination; he was forced to adjust his aesthetic assumptions to its demands—and, accordingly, his narrative technique. That *The Oregon Trail* chronicles such a transformation in Parkman is best seen when he became lost. Describing it in his journal, Parkman writes: “Got separated from the others—rode for hours westwardly over the prairie—saw the hills dotted with thousands of buffalo. Antelopes—prairie dogs—burrowing owls—wild geese—wolves, etc. Finding my course wrong, followed a buffalo-track northward, and about noon came out on the road. Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie” (*Journals*, II: pp. 343-35). Parkman’s last sentence becomes the basis for a lengthy passage of description and analysis in *The Oregon Trail*:

I looked about for some indications to show me where I was, and what course I ought to pursue; I might as well have looked for landmarks in the midst of the ocean. How

many miles I had run, or in what direction, I had no idea; and around me the prairie was rolling in steep swells and pitches, without a single distinctive feature to guide me. I had a little compass hung at my neck; and ignorant that the Platte at this point diverged considerably from its easterly course, I thought that by keeping to the northward I should certainly reach it. So I turned and rode about two hours in that direction. The prairie changed as I advanced, softening away into easier undulations, but nothing like the Platte appeared, nor any sign of a human being: the same wild, endless expanse lay around me still; and to all appearance I was as far from my object as ever. I began now to think myself in danger of being lost, and, reining in my horse, summoned the scanty share of woodcraft that I possessed (if that term be applicable on the prairie) to extricate me. It occurred to me that the buffalo might prove my best guides. I soon found one of the paths made by them in their passage to the river: it ran nearly at right angles to my course; but turning my horse's head in the direction it indicated, his freer gait and erected ears assured me that I was right. (p. 81)

Parkman here dissects for his reader the nature of his "awkward" feeling: on the prairie, he realizes, none of the conventional means of orientation applies. One who is lost in a landscape without landmarks must rethink his definition of "landmark," just as he must rethink the applicability of the term "woodcraft" to such a landscape. Instead of looking for a "distinctive feature" in a landscape which is largely without such things, Parkman eventually realizes that he must work with those features which do exist on the prairie. Instead of looking up for some upright thing for orientation, Parkman realizes that on the prairie one is better served by looking down and following the way of a buffalo trail. Palpable in this passage is Parkman's growing frustration over his disorientation, along with his growing awareness that he must adapt imaginatively in order to find his way. Thus the passage in *The Oregon Trail* is articulate and dramatic, while the journal entry, made immediately after the incident, suggests only the nascent feeling of awkwardness. Through subsequent consideration and reassessment of the event, Parkman was able to define and articulate the exact nature of the effect that the prairie had on his imagination (thus his use of repeated descriptions of the surrounding vastness, the extent of his disorientation, and attention to the applicability of the term "woodcraft"). A comparison of the two passages, indeed, makes the extent of the prairie's effect on Parkman's imagination all the more apparent. Just as earlier he was uncertain about why the prairie around the Platte struck him as beautiful, now he is forced to probe the nature of his "awkward feeling" when lost on the prairie.<sup>4</sup>

Parkman's use and evaluation of plains phenomena is of a similar order. For example, in two instances he employs the setting sun (and its resulting mirage effect of making objects look larger) as a descriptive tool. In the first of these he describes a boy who was traveling with an emigrant group. The boy, Parkman says, "was short and stout, but his legs were of disproportioned and appalling length. I observed him at sunset, breasting the hill with giant strides, and standing against the sky on the summit, like a colossal pair of

tongs" (p. 76). This combination of back-lighting and the mirage illusion, increasing the figure's apparent size, is the direct result of the prairie landscape. Similarly, while leaving an Arapahoe Indian camp, Parkman views it against a glowing western sky: "When about a mile from the village, I turned and looked back over the undulating ocean of grass. The sun was just set; the western sky was all in a glow, and sharply defined against it, on the extreme verge of the plain, stood the clustered lodges of the Arapahoe camp" (p. 352).

In addition to presenting strikingly visual details produced by the prairie landscape, these descriptions also verify a preconceived expectation created in Parkman by Cooper's *The Prairie*. Since he knew Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* well, Parkman could not have missed the author's use of the figure against the setting sun as his means of introducing Natty Bumppo in *The Prairie*. Hence Parkman's use of this phenomenon is different from its discussion in Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairie* or James's *Account of the Long expedition*, to name only two instances in which the prairie mirage is described. When each of these men discussed the mirage effect on the prairie, they were simply describing a natural phenomenon and providing examples. When Parkman uses the same phenomenon here, however, he is using it as a literary device, one appropriated from Cooper, who had himself appropriated it from the James *Account*.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, with *The Oregon Trail*, topography is translated into the literary landscape that is setting, just as with Parkman, prairie description can be said to have passed from the logs of travel into travelogue.

To summarize briefly then, the first artists were imaginatively struck by the prairie landscape just like the first explorers and travelers, but their problem was more acute. Explorers and travelers had only to learn to travel and live within the environment and, perhaps, to describe it. The artists, of whom Francis Parkman was among the first, had to do this and also accommodate their art to the new land in which they found themselves. To do so, Parkman was forced to rethink his most basic assumptions about language, aesthetics, and literary form. Along the Oregon Trail he found a landscape that was, as he said, "strange, too, and striking to the imagination," one that required conventions and understandings of its own as Americans moved westward.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mason Wade, *Francis Parkman: Heroic Historian* (New York: Viking, 1942), pp. 220-25; Mason Wade, *Introd. "The Oregon Trail Journal, 1846,"* in *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, ed. Mason Wade (New York: Harper, 1947), II: pp. 385-95; Bernard De Voto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), *passim*. For an account of Parkman's reading prior to his trip, see E. N. Feltskog's editorial notes in his scholarly edition of *The Oregon Trail: Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail* (1849; rpt. [ed. E. N. Feltskog] Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 460-61, n. 16. The phrase "by heart" is Feltskog's. Mason Wade also discusses Parkman's reading; see *Journals*, II: p. 397. All references to *The Oregon Trail* are from this edition.

For a general discussion of the effect exerted by the prairie-plains landscape on explorers and travelers, as seen in their writings, see my "The Plains Landscape and Descriptive Technique," *Great Plains*

*Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1982), pp. 146-56. Here I place *The Oregon Trail* in a wider context, one which suggests the pivotal role the book plays in the literary history of the west.

<sup>2</sup> Some comment should be made regarding the circumstances surrounding the composition of *The Oregon Trail*, which Wade describes as having been composed under "singular difficulties," (*Journals*, II: p. 385). Parkman's eyes, which were to trouble him for the rest of his life, were adversely affected by his western trip; so much so that he dictated *The Oregon Trail* to others, who would read a journal entry and, once Parkman had framed his passage aloud, copy that one down. Thus use of "write" does not really describe what Parkman did in order to get his book on paper. The obvious problems posed by such an arrangement led to several disputes over the text. These concerns are addressed and allayed by Feltskog.

<sup>3</sup> *Journals*, II: p. 417. All references to Parkman's journals are from the Wade edition.

<sup>4</sup> Here, too, Parkman changed his emphasis, giving his feelings while lost greater emphasis. While in his journal entry he notes the local fauna before mentioning his "awkward feeling," in *The Oregon Trail* he inverts the presentation, so that he discusses animals and vegetation only after he has analyzed his feelings.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820*. 3 vols. (London, 1823). For a discussion of Cooper's use of the James Account, see Orm Överland, *The Making and Meaning of an American Classic: James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, and New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 76-77.

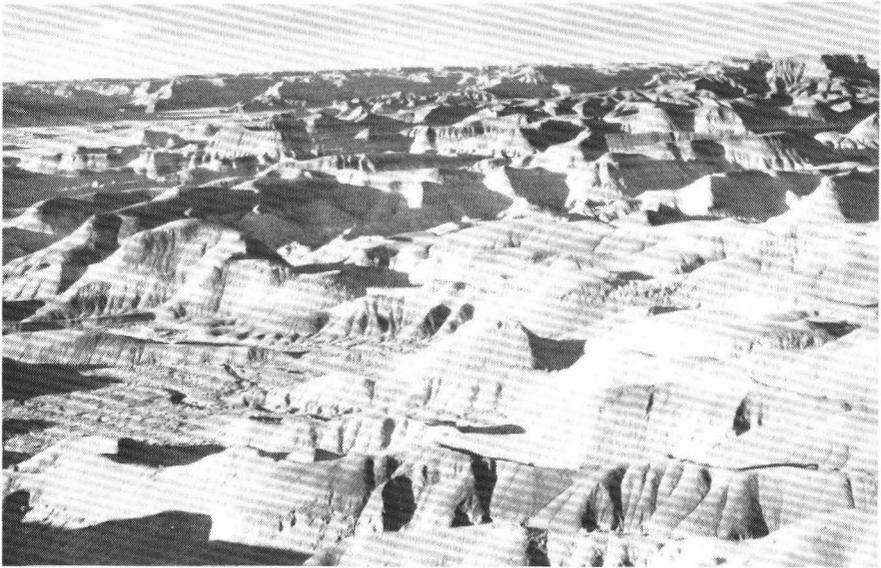
## *Everett Ruess: Western Romantic*

STEPHEN L. TANNER

IN NOVEMBER OF 1934, a young man named Everett Ruess disappeared in the remote and barren lands near Utah's Escalante River. For several years this Los Angeles youth had wandered alone or with pack animals through the wilderness areas of California and the deserts of the Southwest. He was motivated by an astonishing appetite for adventure and natural beauty. He sought intense impressions and tried to capture them both with paintbrush and pencil. His disappearance remains a mystery. His burros were found, but none of his equipment. Aside from some footprints, the only clue discovered was the cryptic word "NEMO," and the date, scraped on a rock and on a dwelling in an Indian ruin. This puzzling disappearance spawned a fascinating assortment of conjectural explanations: he fell to his death from a cliff, he was killed by Indians, he was killed by cattle rustlers, he went off secretly to live with the Indians, he deliberately disappeared to start a new life in a foreign country and is still alive, and so on.

Although Ruess aspired to be an artist and did watercolors and blockprints of the natural scenes he visited, he displayed perhaps greater skill in writing. His letters and diaries vividly describe not only the mountain and desert landscapes he contemplated so intensely but also the romantic aspirations and tensions of an unusually sensitive aesthetic temperament. Some of the letters were published serially in *The Desert Magazine* during 1939, and generated so much interest that the editors published *On Desert Trails with Everett Ruess* in 1940, with a second edition in 1950. This slim volume, now long out of print and rarely seen, contains thirty-three letters, eight poems, an essay, ten blockprints, and two watercolors.<sup>1</sup> In 1983, Peregrine Smith Books of Salt Lake City published *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, a significantly larger collection of Ruess's writing (more than a hundred letters, along with diary entries, a few poems, and excerpts from his few essays) accompanied with introductory and background information based on recent research and interviews. The book is edited by W. L. Rusho, with an introduction by John Nichols and an afterword in the form of a sonnet by Edward Abbey.<sup>2</sup>

This collection of letters will be of special interest to students of western American literature, partly because of its intrinsic literary merit, but more importantly for the way it illuminates the western experience, particularly the romantic component of that experience. Everett Ruess epitomized youth-



The Painted Desert, north of Winslow, Arizona, is an area probably traveled by Ruess. (Nevada Historical Society.)

ful aspiration and romantic yearning as they are conjoined with nature in the West. His vividly recorded experiences and impressions display in their youthful enthusiasm and naivete the essential attitudes and motivations that have vivified the western experience. In a remarkable way, he is the real-life equivalent of certain characters in western fiction, particularly those of Willa Cather. He acted out some of the important patterns of western history and literature: the search for identity, the quest for experience, the attraction away from civilization to the wilderness, the desire to live life on the brink, the tension between the satisfactions of solitary communion with nature and the need for satisfying communion with other persons.

Ruess began his wanderings in 1930, when he was sixteen. With bedroll and backpack he hitchhiked up the coast from his Los Angeles home to Carmel and camped out by the ocean:

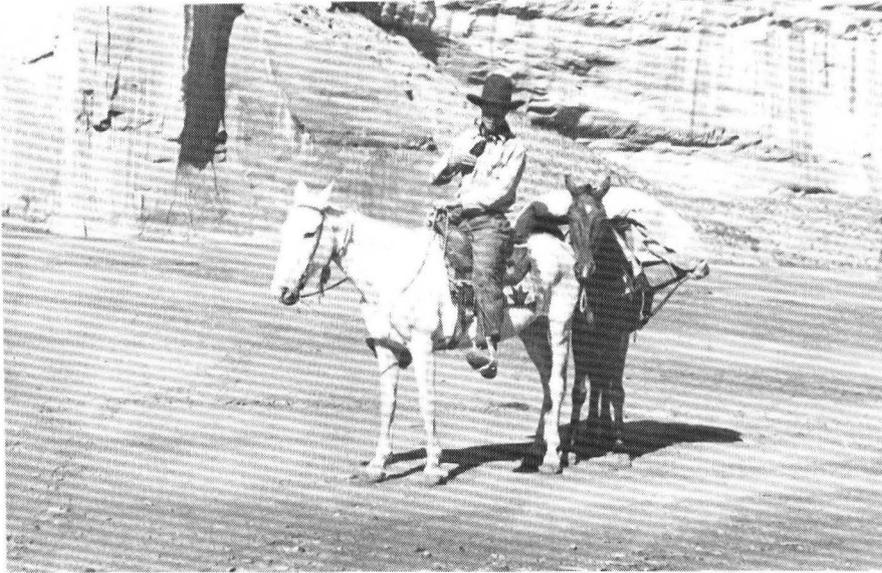
I awoke with a quiver, nerves tautly on edge. It came again, what had awakened me—the harsh, weird scream of a grey gull swooping low above me in the darkness. A heavy, clinging fog had set in, making the place indescribably desolate. Nothing was visible. I was alone, on the tip of a solitary, knife-edged point of land, which, through some queer whim, I had selected for my resting place that night. My sleeping bag was wedged into a shallow crevice. On one side, the bare granite fell sheer away into the foaming sea. On the other, the rock was joined to the main promontory, but beneath, a narrow, high vaulted tunnel had been eaten out by the ocean. A slender crevice pierced the roof through to the sky at one point. Each wave that came crashed far into the narrow mouth of the cavern, and a swift rush of cold air and spray was shot out of the vent at the top, as if from a bellows. (p. 13)

The detailed description and the solitary mood of this passage are characteristic of the frequent letters he sent to family and friends during the next four years. Typical also is the way he has situated himself on the edge of a precipice. Whether on the pacific coast, on a mountain in the Sierra, or on a mesa in the Southwest, Ruess always loved to be on the edge, on the brink, of an overlook. This tendency is an apt symbol of his obsessive desire to take in as much natural beauty as possible regardless of risk.

While in Carmel, he introduced himself to Edward Weston, at that time one of America's most famous and successful photographers. Ruess had a surprising boldness in availing himself of opportunities to meet other artists. When he spent the winter of 1933 in San Francisco, he made the acquaintance of Maynard Dixon, a painter famous for his scenes from the Southwest, whose murals are found on the walls of the Interior Department Building in Washington, D.C., and in several public buildings throughout the West. Dixon was married to Dorothea Lange, who established a reputation during the 1930s as one of a team of Farm Security Administration photographers who recorded the human tragedy of the Depression in the Dust Bowl. She took several portraits of Ruess, two of which appear in *Everett Ruess: Vagabond for Beauty*. He also met the late Ansel Adams and traded one of his own prints for an Adams photograph.

His forwardness in establishing friendships with such people was part of his youthful eagerness to immerse himself in art, music, and literature. While in San Francisco or Los Angeles he frequented concerts, operas, and productions of Shakespeare. While on the trail he read copiously: *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, *The Magic Mountain*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, and numerous other works of fiction, poetry, philosophy, and psychology. His letters are sprinkled with titles. Books and music provided him a deliciously overwhelming sense of discovery that is probably experienced only in adolescence.

Combined with this hunger for literature and music was a passion for adventure, for a new identity capable of transcending the dull and ordinary. As he began his first wanderings in the desert country of the Southwest, he signed his letters Lan Rameau and named his burro Everett to remind himself of the kind of person he used to be (p. 37). Later he tried Everett Rulan as a pen name and changed the burro's name to Pegasus. When he acquired another burro, he named it Pericles, for, he said, "like the Greek, he is the father of a golden age" (p. 54). Another burro he named Percival. At the same time he was trying through the use of names to define for himself a new and romantic identity, he was writing to his family statements such as this: "I feel very different from the boy who left Hollywood two months ago. I have changed as well as matured" (p. 39). Whether or not he had changed as much as he hoped during those two months, the maturing was underway. He was soon using his own name again, and after he had had enough experience with



Everett Ruess and his two horses at Canyon de Chelly (Arizona), 1932. (From *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, by W. L. Rusho. Published by Peregrine Smith Books, Layton, Utah.)

the nature of burros to learn how little they had to do with mythic flights, holy quests, and golden ages, he gave them such names as Betsy and Grandma.

What brought him to the Southwest was a desire for frontier adventure. Arriving in a remote area of Arizona in February of 1931, he wrote to a friend, "Here I am at last on what was, ten years ago, the final frontier" (p. 27). And during the next few years of solitary wanderings he indeed knew adventure: treacherous trails, dangerous weather, perilous cliff climbing, a terrifying encounter with a wild bull, meetings with the bizarre variety of characters frontier regions attract. In 1934, he wrote to a friend, "I like adventure and enjoy taking chances when skill and fortitude play a part. If we never had any adventures, we would never know what 'stuff' was in us" (p. 140). To another friend the same year he wrote, "It seems that only in moments of desperation is the soul most truly revealed. Perhaps that's why I am so often so unrestrained, for always I sense the brink of things. And as you say, it is impossible to grasp enough of life. There is always something that eludes one" (p. 150).

Ruess once said he was living "with an undercurrent of starvation and an overtone of magnificent music" (p. 108). This is an apt characterization of the life reflected in his letters. The voice is combination of Pater and Thoreau modulated with youthful enthusiasm and self-posturing. "I have always been unsatisfied with life as most people live it," he wrote to a friend, "Always I want to live more intensely and richly. Why muck and conceal one's true

longings and loves, when by speaking of them one might find someone to understand them, and by acting on them one might discover one's self" (p. 161)? To the same friend he confided, "I thought that there were two rules in life—never count the cost, and never do anything unless you can do it wholeheartedly. Now is the time to live" (p. 152). He responded to a letter from a girl he was fond of,

It shocked me slightly when you spoke of my greed for life. That is a harsh word, but I guess it is true. I am not willing to take anything but the most from life. . . . I certainly don't like to let opportunities for living slip by ungrasped, and I never liked the game of sitting back in a corner and wishing. (p. 149)

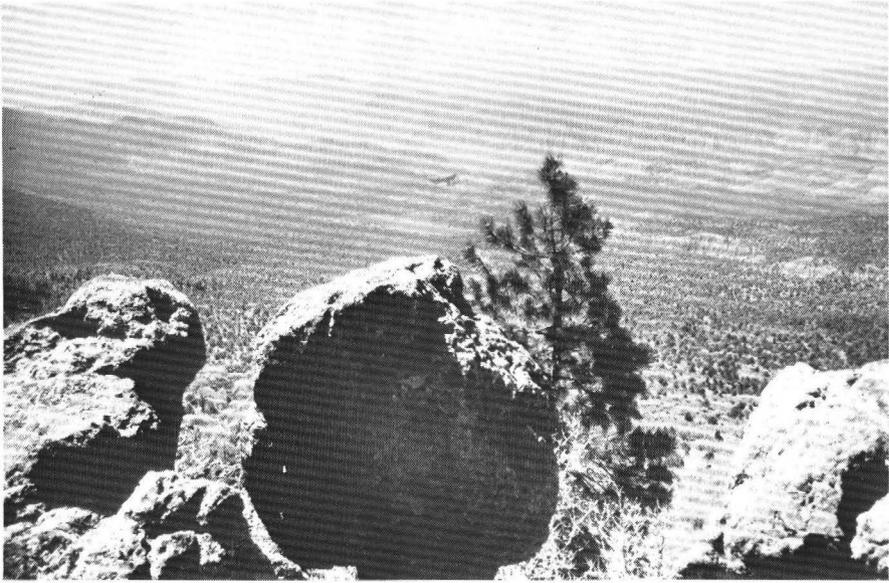
To a friend named Bill, he characteristically wrote in an extravagant tone of self-posturing tinged with a hint of self-parody. Here is a sample:

Once more I am roaring drunk with the lust of life and adventure and unbearable beauty. I have the devil's own conception of a perfect time; adventure seems to beset me on all quarters without my even searching for it; I find gay comrades and lead the wild, free life wherever I am. And yet there is always an undercurrent of restlessness and wild longing; "the wind is in my hair, there's a fire in my heels," and I shall always be a rover, I know. (p. 145)

In the same letter he asserts, "Finality does not appall me, and I seem always to enjoy things the more intensely because of the certainty that they will not last." He is satisfied with "a riotously plunging and soaring existence" (p. 146).

To another friend he reports, "I had some terrific experiences in the wilderness since I wrote you last—overpowering, overwhelming. But then I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life" (p. 89). In a letter written from the Sierra, he says, "Much of the time I feel so exuberant that I can hardly contain myself. The colors are so glorious, the forests so magnificent, the mountains so splendid, and the streams so utterly, wildly, tumultuously, effervescently joyful that to me at least, the world is a riot of sensual delight." He describes dancing along a road at night, singing melodies from Beethoven, Brahms, and Ravel: "I rocked from side to side of the road. I spun around in circles, looking up at the stars, and swung exultantly down the white pathway to adventure. Adventure is for the adventurous. Oh, I have lived intensely, drinking deep!" (p. 104). Such moments of harmonious happiness in nature seem to have produced for him the experience of the everlasting now sought by the Transcendentalists: "More than ever before, I have succeeded in stopping the clock. I need no timepiece, knowing that now is the time to live" (p. 99). And again, "Time and the need of time have ceased entirely" (p. 102).

The self-dramatization in such passages might produce in us no more than a condescending smile if it were not for the fact that this young man persis-



Mt. Logan Wilderness, Arizona Strip. The majestic wilderness of the West attracted Everett Ruess. (Nevada Historical Society.)

tently lived out his enthusiasms. In the last letter known to have been received by him, a letter to his brother Waldo (November 11, 1934), he said, "I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities" (p. 178). He concluded, "This has been a full, rich year. I have left no strange or delightful thing undone that I wanted to do" (p. 180). As Wallace Stegner pointed out in a brief tribute to Ruess in *Mormon Country*,

We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. Esthetics as a parlor affectation is ludicrous and sometimes a little obscene; as a way of life it sometimes attains dignity. If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age. (p. 8)

The choice to be "a vagabond for beauty" was not a painless one for Everett Ruess. His parents were apparently understanding, but they were also well educated and desired a college education for their son. In fact, Everett did enroll at UCLA for five months in 1932-33, but he wasn't comfortable there and didn't do well in any of his classes except English and geology. At the end of the interval, he wrote playfully to a friend, "How little you know me to

think I could still be in the University! How could a lofty, unconquerable soul like mine remain imprisoned in that academic backwater, wherein all but the most docile wallow in a hopeless slough" (p. 96). To another friend he wrote, "College was a valuable episode, but I didn't let it get a strangle hold on me" (p. 94). Underlying the facetiousness of these statements is a serious purpose, which becomes clearer a year later, when he responds to his father's encouragement to return to college. He informs his father that he feels well enough off without "going through the college mill," and tells him that in compensation for what college might offer, "I have my deep sensitivities to beauty, to music, and to nature." He insists that he neither regrets his freedom nor envies college graduates and asserts that his father cannot make him feel ashamed of himself for what he is doing: "As for me, I have tasted your cake, and I prefer your unbuttered bread. I don't wish to withdraw from life to college, and I have a notion, conceited or not, that I know what I want from life, and can act upon it" (p. 131).

Besides the pressure to go to college and conform to the conventional patterns for a young man transforming himself into a responsible citizen, there was also the pressure to take responsibility in a world so much in trouble. These were Depression years and Ruess was intelligent and informed enough to be aware of social problems. He had argued with Communists and had watched a Young Communist League demonstration broken up by the police. He had confronted the notion that no first rate mind in that day of crisis could possibly be interested in beauty or art when the world was in the throes of death and birth. His answer is revealed in this letter from Arizona in 1934: "Around me stretches the illimitable desert, and far off and near by are the outposts of suffering, struggling, greedy, grumbling humanity. But I don't choose to join on that footing. I'm sorry for it and I help it when I can, but I'll not shoulder its woes. To live is to be happy; to be carefree, to be overwhelmed by the glory of it all" (p. 134).

About the same time, he admits to his father that he has done what he wanted most in spite of the world crisis and points out that this is not the case with some of his friends: "They have been wallowing in the shallows of life this past year—not growing or having new and enlarging experiences; driven partly or wholly by circumstances into lives that they themselves consider ignoble, stale, and depressing" (p. 134). "For myself," he writes elsewhere, "I am doing my best to have variety and intensity of experience, and largely succeeding, I think" (p. 131). In still another letter, he says he is proud of his life, "for I believe that I have really lived life at its most intense, and that I shall continue to do so" (p. 125). As he summarizes his career, "I have gone my way regardless of everything but beauty" (p. 157).

This single-minded determination undoubtedly brought its rewards, but it was not without cost, the highest price being the lack of communion with minds of similar intelligence and sensitivity, spirits with the same adventure-



The Everett Ruess Natural Arch in Davis Gulch near the Escalante River in Utah, the area where Ruess disappeared. (Harry Aleson Collection, Utah State Historical Society.)

some and aesthetic vitality. As Hamlin Garland wrote to Everett's parents in 1937, "Your son was a most unusual spirit. I have never known a youth of like endowment and predeliction" (p. 207). The lament for the lack of stimulating and sympathetic friends echoes like a leitmotif throughout the letters:

I don't have much trouble getting along with people, but I have the greatest difficulty in finding the sort of companionship I want. (p. 76)

I want friends as much as anyone, but my ideals of friendship make it very difficult to find true friends. (p. 87)

I have some good friends here, but no one who really understands why I am here or what I do. I don't know of anyone, though, who would have more than a partial understanding; I have gone too far alone. (p. 160)

My tragedy is that I don't fit in with any class of people. (p. 75)

The principal reason for this lament was the frustration he felt in being unable

to share his intense impressions: "I am drunk with a searing intoxication that liquor could never bring—drunk with the fiery elixir of beauty, the destroying draught of power, and the soul piercing inevitability of music. Often I am tortured to think that what I so deeply feel must always remain, for the most, unshared, uncommunicated." He complains of feeling condemned to feel a withering fire of beauty pouring into him: "I am condemned to the need of putting this fire outside myself and spreading it somewhere, somehow, and I am torn by the knowledge that what I have felt cannot be given to another. I cannot bear to contain these rending flames, and I am helpless to let them out. So I wonder how I can go on living and being casual as one must" (p. 151).

How seriously can one take these protestations? I suppose that is part of the mystery connected with Everett Ruess. He certainly provides enough vivid description to convince us that he observed the natural beauty of the West with remarkable passion and perception. Some of his statements are particularly intriguing in light of his strange disappearance:

But he who has looked long on naked beauty may never return to the world, and though he should try, he will find its occupation empty and vain, and human intercourse purposeless and futile. Alone and lost, he must die on the altar of beauty. (p. 148)

I have been thinking more and more that I shall always be a lone wanderer of the wilderness. God, how the trail lures me. You cannot comprehend its resistless fascination for me. After all the lone trail is the best. . . . I'll never stop wandering. And when the time comes to die, I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is. (p. 78)

My burro and I, and a little dog, are going on and on, until, sooner or later, we reach the end of the horizon. (p. 65)

Everett Ruess was twenty when he disappeared. His literary contribution is minor, and it is futile to speculate about what he might have accomplished had he lived longer. But these letters, through their naive enthusiasm and exaggeration as well as their moments of poignant beauty and revelation of character, bring into sharp relief the attitudes and aspirations that animate the literature of the American West. The lure of the frontier and the desire to test oneself against it that is a significant ingredient in western writers from Theodore Roosevelt to A. B. Guthrie is revealed in a kind of naked innocence in these letters. The response to natural beauty that characterizes writers from John Muir to Joseph Wood Krutch is revealed in its unabashed hunger. Likewise, the enticements of solitude, the alienation from urban life, the tensions between independent lonely freedom and interdependent communion with humankind are all revealed in enlightening ways. The publication of *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* is a service to all those seeking an understanding of the contours of western American literature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Randall Henderson, ed., *On Desert Trails with Everett Ruess* (Palm Desert, California: Desert Magazine Press, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> W. L. Rusho, ed., *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983).

## *Hal Bridges As Ideal Western Man in Walter Clark's The Track of the Cat*

ANTHONY COLLIS

WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK'S *The Track of the Cat* is, primarily and overwhelmingly, a novel constructed of symbols; every artifact, every animal, every element of the natural scene radiates meaning beyond itself. Similarly, the characters in the novel are developed as symbolic portraits, for Clark's method of characterization is not to present his characters in the modern mode of slice-of-life psychological reality, but rather to rely on the methods of the classic American romance, in which human beings are shown in abstract or symbolic relationship. Therefore, the symbolic functions of the characters determine the structure of the novel's plot. Clark pairs off characters and their symbolic attributes against one another in a series of conflicts to reveal the novel's meaning. And that meaning, in keeping with American romantic traditions, is essentially moral, for in the character of Hal Bridges, Clark presents us with a design for the ideal Western American man.<sup>1</sup>

Three of the main characters have been analyzed in such depth that their symbolic affiliations seem beyond dispute. Arthur represents the mystic, the visionary dreamer endowed with a gift of empathy and a deep understanding of natural processes, loving and passive, whose primary goal is to find a religious unity with nature. Curt, Arthur's polar opposite, is the practical and arrogant man of the world, a materialistic exploiter and despoiler of nature, selfish and aggressive, often violent, without faith in anything he cannot see or touch, as crude and powerful as the sound of his name suggests. Joe Sam, of course, represents the natural man of a bygone epoch, primitive and superstitious, vengeful and resentful over his loss of his land, but in touch with nature and the forces of the subconscious in a way forever closed to civilized man.

Arthur and Curt are allied to three of the minor characters who share all or some of their beliefs until the whole complex of the novel is reduced to a pair of opposing camps representing unalloyed Good and Evil. Curt is closely associated with the father in a number of ways. Both are consumed by a desire for "a life somewhere out of this Godforsaken hole."<sup>2</sup> Both are contemptuous of Arthur's and Joe Sam's beliefs. Both share an affinity for cigars,



Curt, played by Robert Mitchum, in the 1954 film production of *Track of the Cat*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

whiskey, and women (compare Curt's dreams with the father's reminiscences and his philippic in chapter fifteen). And both are overwhelmingly materialistic, as Grace so pointedly testifies, "And Curt and Father don't even have a God, not any kind. . . . Only self importance and wanting their own way, and money, money, money" (p. 148). Curt is also allied to the mother, despite her

objections to Curt's "blasphemy," by the similarity of their overpowering wills, the "dancing furies" that appear in their angry eyes, and their unbending assurance of their own righteousness.

Arthur is allied to Joe Sam by their deep understanding and trust of one another, by their concern for natural processes, and by their similar personalities. As the father comments, "He's as completely a dreamer as Joe Sam himself, only it isn't just by spells" (p. 49). In addition to Joe Sam, Arthur finds an ally in his sister Grace, who is "so foolishly fond of him," and who defends him so vehemently after his death (p. 109). Not surprisingly, it is Joe Sam and Grace who attempt to dissuade Arthur from joining Curt on the fatal hunt.

To take such a simplistic view of the characterization in *The Track of the Cat*, so that the tale becomes little more than a guileless allegory, would be to seriously misread Clark's novel. Certainly, examples abound in the work to prove the characters are not so strictly grouped, that for all their differences they are a family and so share one another's traits. The central point of such artificial groupings is not to imply that Clark presents his characters as such, but that Hal, the focal character of the novel, initially perceives the others as such. Hal, in his adolescent conception, sees the other members of the family as clear representatives of good and evil forces. And it is through the development of Hal's character that Clark develops a major theme of the novel. As Clark has stated, "[Man] is himself only a part of nature, and his own very existence depends not upon 'conquering' nature but upon fitting himself into its patterns."<sup>3</sup> If Hal is to find his right relationship to the pattern of nature, to become Ideal Western Man, he must come to see that good and evil forces are inherent in all men.

The scheme of placing an adolescent character in a middle position between two opposing forces shows a consistent pattern throughout Clark's fiction. In *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Gil Carter, caught between Art Davies's conception of man as a creature of reason and Gerald Tetley's view of man as a ravaging beast, comes to understand the antithetical elements of his own nature, his newfound understanding being expressed by his desire at the end of the novel to leave town rather than risk a fight with Rose Mapen's husband in which Gil's own destructive nature would be let loose.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Tim Hazard of the *The City of Trembling Leaves* comes to an understanding of himself only after a long struggle to balance two opposing forces, although in Tim's case the forces are represented by the decadent city, which is opposed to generative Nature, rather than by two human characters. But Hal Bridges most closely resembles another of Clark's adolescent characters, young Buck of *The Watchful Gods*. Like Hal, Buck sees a world in which all things take sides. The forces of good are represented in Buck's mind by the innumerable, joyous "sprites" of the natural world, which he associates with the ecstasy of living; the forces of evil find a deity in the "fog god," whom he associates with



From left, Ma Bridges played by Beulah Bondi, Harold played by Tab Hunter, and Arthur played by William Hopper in the 1954 production of *Track of the Cat*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

death. Early in the novel, Hal's cosmology seems very close to Buck's, when Hal sees the struggle on the Bridges' ranch as being the "God of Life" against the "God of Death" (p. 112). During Buck's hunt, which is also his initiation into the adult world, he comes to realize that "the powers of light and darkness were not wholly and always opposed to one another," a realization that makes him "at the same time wish to weep and burst into triumphant song."<sup>5</sup>

Clark emphasizes Hal's dialectical outlook by devoting part one of the novel almost exclusively to the contrasts between Arthur and Curt. The first chapter establishes their fundamental differences primarily through the device of their verbal duel, and the narrative point of view throughout part one alternates between Arthur and Curt to further emphasize their differences. Indeed, even the stark black and white imagery of the first chapters is designed to reflect Hal's world view. Although Hal is present in nearly all the scenes of part one set in the ranch house, he remains a figure in the background, speaking little and thinking less. What Hal must come to see is that the good and evil he sees in his brothers is present in him, too.

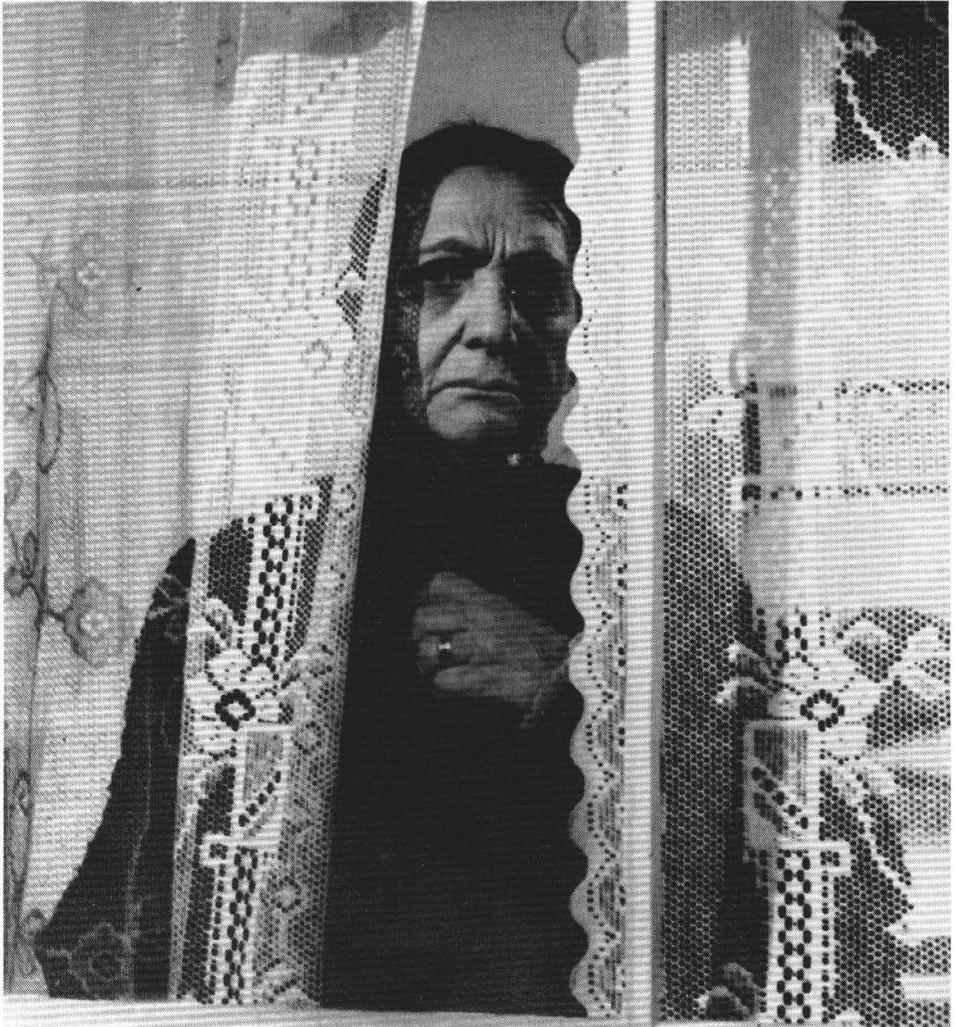
I believe Clark means to imply such a reading of *The Track of the Cat* by naming his focal character Hal, with its suggestion of Shakespeare's young prince. Like Clark's character, Shakespeare's Prince Hal is an adolescent caught between the antithetical worlds of Falstaff and Hotspur, worlds which he must learn to balance, taking for his own the positive values of each. As King Henry V offers a standard for the ideal English monarch, Hal Bridges offers an ideal model for man in the American West. And just as Shakespeare's play closes with the promise of Hal's future glory, so Clark's novel ends with a promise of Hal's success.

The reason for Hal's success is, in part, his ability to combine in himself the best traits of his brothers while rejecting the worst traits of his parents. Hal eventually combines Arthur's vision and respect for nature with Curt's practical know-how and driving will; at the same time, he avoids the crippling effects that the decadent city has left on the father and that narrow-minded Calvinism has left on the mother. However, Hal is above all a member of the Bridges family, and the same corrupting forces at work in the others are at work in him as well. Hal has not been granted a special immunity to the sickness that infests the ranch. He, like the others, is continually challenged, and several times walks a thin line between good and evil. But Hal has been given a type of grace, evident in his love for Gwen and his sympathetic understanding of Joe Sam, that allows him to balance the disparate forces of his nature, master his anger, and achieve a unified wholeness.

At least six times during the course of the novel, Hal's special grace allows him a moment of expanding vision in which he is able to see a profound meaning in even the most mundane events, and each of these moments gives him an increasingly deeper insight into his own nature and his place in the pattern of nature. The first of these moments arrives when he is left alone with Arthur's body in the snow and gathering darkness of the yard, and, "for a few seconds, the dusk seemed to him sadly and enormously charged with meaning" (p. 99). This moment, however, has little lasting effect on Hal, for "The impression passed . . . without leaving anything for his mind to keep, except that he was a little eased by the bigness of the moment" (p. 99).

Hal is more receptive to his next "big moment," in which he gains an insight into the fundamental difference between Gwen's generative love and his mother's destructive hate. The moment occurs in the kitchen, when Hal experiences his vision of the God of Life opposing the God of Death, when "Everything seemed to be getting more beautiful and more important around him" (p. 112). However, as soon as his anger at his mother surfaces, the moment disappears, and Hal feels compelled to reach out to Gwen "as if something had come out of Gwen to him and made the moment big in the first place" (p. 112).

Hal's third important insight follows hard upon the vision in the kitchen which has left him feeling "the whole weight of what was in the house" (p.



Ma Bridges, played by Beulah Bondi, in the 1954 movie, *Track of the Cat*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

112). The vague despair Hal has been feeling is now clarified by this vision into a potent threat to himself when, expecting to see Joe Sam's tracks in the fresh snow, he sees only his own and is possessed by the idea "that everybody on the place was changing toward something strange and evil, but all of them together, and so gradually that no one could see what was happening except

when some little hint of the unnatural got out, like this" (p. 133). At this point, Hal begins to understand that the evil that infests the family is part of his nature, too, and that he must somehow find a way to live with that inheritance.

Hal's first three glimpses behind the screen of the outward appearance of his world give him an awareness of the evil rooted in the family and in himself. His last three visionary moments, in keeping with Clark's point-counterpoint organization, lead Hal toward a realization of his right relationship to nature. The first of these incidents occurs while he watches Joe Sam feed the chickens, a mundane task in which Hal discovers great meaning. The chickens themselves seem to be symbolic of the multiple forces inherent in the world, the flock being described as of "all kinds, gray and red and black and crossed, and the harder colors of their combs and wattles, their beaks and legs, made bright flecks and spots upon the soft colors of the feathery mass" (p. 140). Hal sees in Joe Sam's scattering grain "the motion of a man sowing seed who likes to do it, and has a feeling that the act is holy and should be thought about" (p. 140). The contrast with the mother's religion, which is not to be thought about or questioned but only obeyed, is inescapable. Hal finds that watching Joe Sam is "like making a prayer that worked inside" and discovers, when the little feeding ceremony is finished, that the watching "had cleaned the last anger out of him" (pp. 139, 141). The attitude of Joe Sam ceremoniously feeding the chickens will later be evident in Hal's gentle nursing of the wounded horse and his ceremonial construction of the signal fire.

Hal's next brush with insight comes in chapter nineteen, which relates the events of Arthur's funeral. In the emotionally charged atmosphere of the funeral, Hal not only gains another insight into the nature of good and evil, but also begins to understand that it is he who must break the pattern of evil, jealousy, and materialism that infests the family:

Harold tried to make a prayer for Arthur, but it wouldn't come, and finally the thought went through his head, all of itself, it would make more sense if it was Arthur praying for us. That was when it got hold of him big, beyond any doubt . . . that Arthur wasn't there at all, and that he never would be again. It was as if all the other times had just been getting ready for this. He stood very still and tight, not making a sound, and without a thought in his mind, feeling the emptiness go down and down in him. . . .

The sinking stopped, and then his mind could cry Arthur's name. . . . Arthur, Arthur, his mind cried twice. Then he got the memory that did help. It was as if Arthur had come because he'd called him. . . . He believed that he was pretty close to understanding what Arthur had thought about things, close in a surer way than he'd been that strange, bright, expanding moment in the kitchen.

. . . All right, Art, I'll try and find out. I'll try and make things go the way you wanted them to. (p. 191)

In the background, running in counterpoint to Hal's silent prayer, is the



Harold, played by Tab Hunter and Grace, played by Teresa Wright, looking at Joe Sam, played by Carl Switzer in the movie, *Track of the Cat*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

halting, ineffectual, spoken prayer of the mother that recalls Curt's attempted prayer over Arthur's body beneath Cathedral Rock, the prayer "that wasn't enough; it didn't fill the bill" (p. 86). The understanding that Hal feels closer to is the knowledge that good and evil, life and death, are not so diametrically and everlastingly opposed as he had formerly believed; Arthur can be recalled from the dead in such a way as to add meaning to Hal's own life. Although Hal now senses the course of his future, his ultimate success is not yet assured, for the chapter closes with an image which suggests he has not yet fully realized his place in the pattern of nature: as he and Joe Sam fill Arthur's grave, their shovels "swung rhythmically, but their rhythms weren't quite the same, so that sometimes the two shovels swung together, and sometimes first one and then the other would swing" (pp. 192-3).

Arthur's coming because Hal calls him in the funeral scene suggests the Christ-like nature of Arthur, a symbolic meaning that John Milton has identified with the black painter, and that he and other critics have also associated with Donald Martin, the innocent victim of *The Ox-Bow Incident*.<sup>6</sup> The Christ symbolism extends to Arthur primarily through his willingness to take

on the sins of his race—"I smell strong of the curse on my breed right now," he thinks as he approaches Cathedral Rock—and through Graces's comment, "He always forgave everything" (pp. 66, 148). Arthur's death is the sacrifice that makes Hal's future possible, both literally and figuratively; and if Arthur's death reenacts Christ's sacrifice, then his return upon Hal's fervent request reenacts Christ's resurrection, three days after Arthur's death in the snow. And just as Arthur is resurrected in Hal's mind, so Hal will also conquer death by killing the black panther and surviving to point the way toward salvation for man in the American West.

Hal's final moment of vision arrives late in chapter twenty, as he angrily indulges his mother by constructing a signal fire for the lost Curt. Angered by both his mother's insistence on building the futile signal fire and by a misunderstanding with Gwen, Hal vents his anger on the sagebrush, and his enraged monologue illustrates the depth of the understanding of the Bridges family traits he has gained during his three-day ordeal:

All right, he thought, if you want a fire, I'll make you a fire that'll show to Oregon. There's nobody to see your Goddam fire, but what do we care about a little thing like that?

"Never let it be said," he muttered . . . "that a Bridges ever did anything in a small way, even if the small way would be better. Whatever it is, do it big, and do it as fast as you can."

"Hell, we're no pikers . . . burn the sheds, burn the house." (pp. 197-8)

Exhausted by the frenzied hacking, Hal rests and utters the line that succinctly sums up his new-found knowledge of his own dual nature: "'Jeez,' he said softly. 'Watch it, boy. It's in you, too'" (p. 198).

Hal's realization of his own duality leads directly to his final and most important insight. In this "expanding moment," Hal gains an ironic perspective that allows him to see himself from a distance, and what he sees "in a little puddle of lantern light, and with the stars over it all the time, and the big, dark silence of the valley around it" is a vision of man's place in the pattern of nature (p. 198). Seeing himself clearly, Hal now understands that man, despite the seeming grandeur of his works and emotions, is but a part of nature, no more or less significant than the snowflakes. After this vision, Hal continues to construct the fire, but more slowly and ceremoniously. His anger now under control, Hal's efforts recall Joe Sam's "holy act" of feeding the chickens and foreshadow Hal's hunting of the cat; "He thought carefully about each little act now" (p. 199).

I do not mean to suggest that Hal achieves his success only by means of a special providence, with no conscious effort of his own involved. Although Hal's visionary moments help him gain a proper perspective, they are as much a result as they are a cause of his success. Before Hal can be considered to have achieved success, he must wrest from the mother control of the ranch



From left, Ma Bridges played by Beulah Bondi, Grace played by Teresa Wright, Harold played by Tab Hunter, and Indian Joe played by Carl Switzer in the 1954 film *Track of the Cat*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

and of himself, and to assume that control, he must confront and master his own destructive anger. Therefore, Clark makes Hal's encounter with his anger a central concern of part two, and, in accordance with the point-counterpoint structure of the novel, he presents Hal's encounter with himself as a direct parallel to Curt's encounter with himself on the mountain. The structure of parts two and three can be conceived of as two interlocking gyres, Hal's expanding outward toward an all-encompassing unity, Curt's spiraling ever inward toward annihilation.

Clark's portrait of Hal early in part one shows him eclipsed by his two brothers and reacting to his situation with an impotent and adolescent anger. Arthur, sensing Hal's frustration and powerlessness in his confrontation with Curt and the mother, plays the roles of peacemaker and guardian of Hal's interests. With Arthur's death, Hal is forced to confront his anger and impotence directly and so begins to focus on the traits of Arthur and Curt that he sees reflected in himself.

Clark emphasizes the similarity of Hal's and Curt's confrontations with

their essential selves by a correspondence of time, imagery, and situation in parts two and three. On the second morning, Hal, searching for Joe Sam, and Curt, seeking the cat, encounter an identical problem: trackless snow. Both find that the act of tracking in the storm arouses a curious sense of distorted reality; Hal's "Wake up, will you?" echoes Curt's identical reminders to himself, and both worry about the track doubling back on them unaware (p. 137). Hal's circular tracking of Joe Sam imitates the larger circle that Curt makes tracking the black cat. Hal even feels, for a moment, an illogical fear of the old Indian comparable to Curt's irrational fear of the dream cat stalking him with the aid of Joe Sam. Hal, however, seeing Joe Sam in the ridiculously oversized boots and coat, "smiled a little in his mind, remembering . . . how he had made a mystery to be afraid of out of this tired, little, old man, who was just holding death off with whiskey and legends" (pp. 138-9).

Despite Hal's amusement, his anger flares out at Joe Sam, and he approaches the old man intent on violently dispossessing him of the broken bottle neck. But before Hal has a chance to act he associates his anger with Curt—"Don't you get like Curt, he told himself"—and recalls how Curt bullied the ancient Indian (p. 139). He then immediately associates Curt with Arthur and remembers Arthur profoundly observing Joe Sam feeding the chickens. "Watching the feeding, and remembering Arthur watching it, had cleaned the last anger out of him" (p. 141). However, in a practical action more like Curt than Arthur, Hal remembers to quietly relieve Joe Sam of his weapon. Hal has found, in the examples of Arthur, Curt, and Joe Sam, a dim map of the road to his maturity.

It is at this point that Hal also begins to accept Joe Sam as an ally and a mentor. In his first defiance of the mother, Hal orders Joe Sam to be fed at the family table despite the mother's long-standing objection. He continues to assert himself against the mother by insisting that Joe Sam help prepare Arthur for burial and by nailing the coffin shut before the mother can arrange a procession: "No damn line-up, like a church. No going around it, staring in. . . . If we put the lid on now she can't" (p. 179). Hal's evident respect for his dead brother reveals the lesson he has learned from Joe Sam's handling of the corpse "Like he was alive still . . . And gentle as a woman at it" (pp. 178-9). Hal, unlike Curt, is learning that the line separating life from death is not so obviously drawn as is practically assumed.

Throughout the second and third day the pressures on Hal at the ranch continue to mount in a fashion parallel to the mounting pressure Curt feels on the mountain. Curt, after briefly regaining some of his confidence concerning directions, suffers a setback. Hal encounters a similar setback when Gwen emotionally rejects him and his anger flares out at her. At the funeral, he determines to "try and make things go the way [Arthur] wanted them to" and begins to deal with his anger by imitating Arthur's quiet resignation. His anger with Gwen rises:

. . . and even with his anger finally beginning to rise through his weariness, slow and heavy, he was afraid she'd start screaming at him so she couldn't be stopped, the way Grace had at the mother.

His anger turned against the mother and flared. . . . Then he thought, like Curt again, and you make a promise to Arthur. Somebody has to try around here and you're the only candidate right now. (pp. 194-5)

Hal continues to associate his anger with Curt during the following scene; enraged, he gasps, " 'It's Curt's fire. Do it Curt's way' " (p. 198). Eventually, the saving vision of himself arrives when he sees "the whole performance the way it would have looked to someone else, to Arthur, for instance," and his anger finally dissolves, not to reappear, with " 'All right, Art . . . Have it your way' " (p. 198).

Hal's ability to see himself in correct perspective to Nature is an ability that Curt never finds, and the lack of his perspective contributes mightily to his destruction. Clark highlights this theme by contrasting Curt's building of his fire with Hal's. Both acts occur at precisely the same time, and both are described in a similar style. Both brothers cut in "a rage" and with "increasing fury," both find their breath coming "in little sobs," and both see the same constellations broken by similar dark forms on the horizon (pp. 293-4). But while Hal feels an invaluable ironic detachment of himself from the episode, Curt "felt very sorry for himself, and wondered at the enormous indifference of a universe which could permit a tragedy of these proportions to be enacted before no audience but trees and stars" (p. 289). Hal's slow and ceremonial conclusion of the act of building the signal fire, so like Joe Sam's ritual feeding of the chickens, contrasts sharply with Curt's frenzy and indicates that Hal, now ritually cleansed of his anger, is in proper accord with nature and fully prepared to hunt the cat.

Once Hal has mastered his anger, the path is cleared for him to assume his mature role as master of the ranch and husband to Gwen. Hal's success, as revealed in chapter twenty-one, is all the more striking because Clark develops it in exact counterpoint to Curt's ultimate failure in chapter thirty. The two chapters correlate in time, after midnight of the third day, and three identical images are central in both: the black horse, the black painter, and Joe Sam. Hal, awakened by Kentuck's screams in the middle of a dream, faces the same threats that Curt faces in his dreams before the fire. Hal, however, by virtue of the "balance" he has achieved in his "expanding moment" while building the fire, can accomplish what Curt cannot; he can separate dream from reality while respecting both. On awakening, he still respects the dream warning—the dream of Arthur "was still what was real, and the rest was a bad dream he'd fallen asleep into. But Arthur had heard the screaming too, and tried to do something about it"—but unlike his brothers, Hal's balance allows him to keep dream and reality in proper perspective—"Then the cold man's mind said, There's no black painter. You're sunk in two dreams, that's all, Joe

Sam's and the one you had in there" (pp. 202-3). Accepting good and evil, waking reality and dream reality, as inseparable parts of his own human condition, Hal goes forth confidently to deal sympathetically with Joe Sam and be reunited with Gwen. Although the fulfillment of their love is once again interrupted by the mother, the tone of the passage indicates that this time the interruption will only be temporary, for when Hal returns to the house, "he sat down in the mother's place," symbolically assuming from her control of the ranch and of his life.

Even though part four of the novel focuses on Hal again, it functions as an epilogue, for Hal's character undergoes no significant development in the final two chapters. Instead, part four confirms our view of Hal as Ideal Western Man, able to balance the multiplicities of his existence. His final dream, one of unity, reveals to him a peaceful valley where "if we could live there . . . there'd never be any trouble," but Hal is now mature enough to reject such a vision of good without evil (p. 318). He confronts the mother again, but with his anger at her replaced by "A reluctant pity . . . for a strong woman forced into complaining" (p. 323). During the hunt, Hal both exhibits a respect for Joe Sam's intuitive knowledge and employs the careful logic of his "cold man's mind." And when Hal finally does kill the cat, he realizes that it is only a natural cat he's killed, not the symbolic black painter, for he has come to know that evil is a part of nature and not a problem that can be overcome once and for all. Rather, Hal's killing of the cat symbolizes his triumph over himself. When he returns to the ranch house, he returns to take control as a whole personality, confident of his ability and respectful of both human nature and the natural world. Joe Sam, who despite his superstition remains the most perceptive character in the novel, pronounces the final judgement of Hal's balanced maturity: "You boss now. No trouble" (p. 343).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John R. Milton, "The Western Attitude: Walter Van Tilburg Clark," *Critique*, 2 (1959), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The Track of the Cat* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 33. All further references appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, "On *The Track of the Cat*," in *Walter Van Tilburg Clark: Critiques*, ed. Charlton Laird (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1983), p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Andersen, "Character Portrayal in *The Ox-Bow Incident*," *Western American Literature*, 4 (1970), *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, "The Watchful Gods," in *The Watchful Gods and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 281 and 305-6.

<sup>6</sup> Milton, "Western Attitude," p. 70.

## Contributors

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## *Afterword*

The Nevada Historical Society has been publishing the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* for nearly thirty years. The first issue appeared in the spring of 1957. Over the years there have been substantial changes in format and a number of editors. The present issue marks a number of significant changes. The most apparent is in format. We have increased the number of illustrations in recent issues, and the new paper is better suited to reproducing photographs. The new cover gives us a more attractive appearance. Inside we are presenting a special issue dedicated to papers given at the Western Literature Association meeting in Reno. As it is appropriate, we intend to dedicate occasional future issues to papers from other professional meetings and events that concern Nevada. All of this supports our primary purposes—to preserve the state's heritage and to make it accessible to the community.

The other change we have made recently is a new editor. Cheryl Ann Young became our Assistant Director on July 1, 1985, and has been working closely with Nevada Historical Society staff and the Editorial Board to make the *Quarterly* one of the outstanding journals in the nation.

To help us in our quest we are asking that you take a few moments to fill out the questionnaire you will find enclosed. Your answers will give us information to assess our progress and plan improvements. As always, we thank you for your support and promise to continue to do our best.

PETER L. BANDURRAGA  
DIRECTOR

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