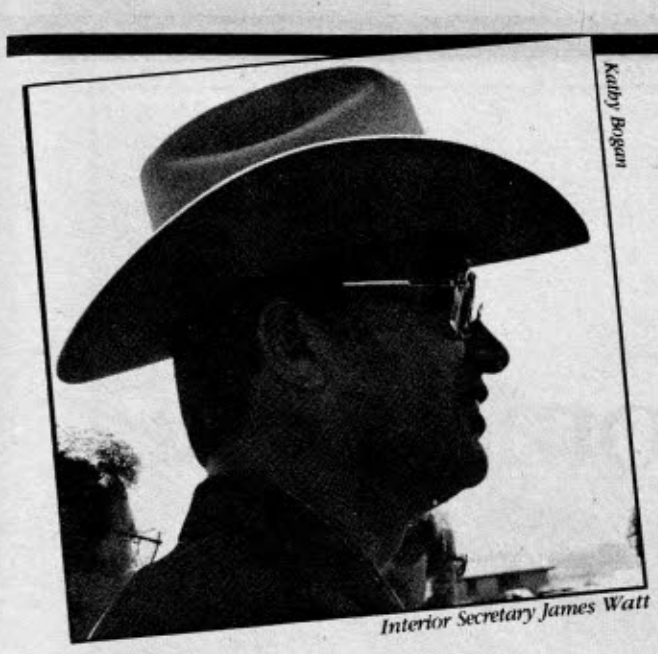
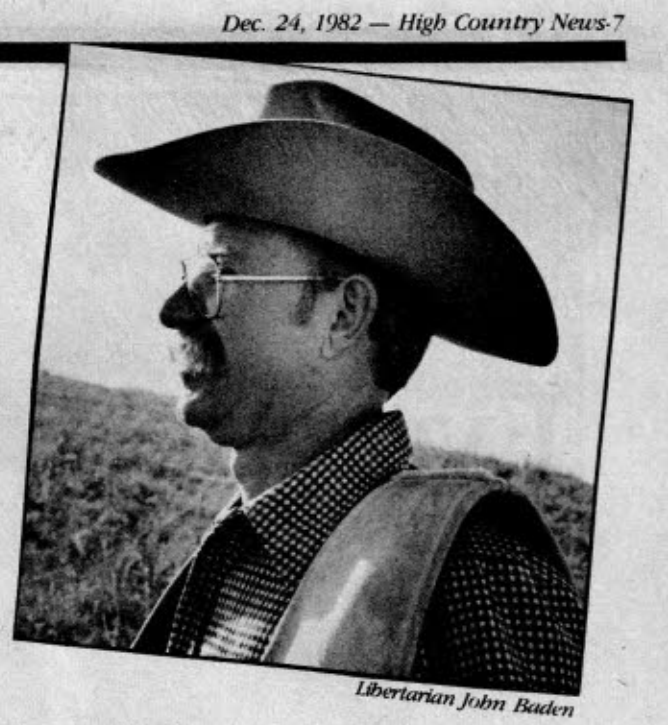


Kathy Bogan

Interior Secretary James Watt

Politics

A perpetual mirage



Libertarian John Baden

by Joan Nice

Way out West the sky's the limit.
Your heart and mind are free.
There's a world with no cares in it.
That's where I want to be.

— "Oregon" by Billy Ray Reynolds

One can be a technotwit, a businessman, a flower child or even a woman and win elections here, but it helps if one also knows how to swing a rope, or at least a fly rod.

The Rocky Mountain West is still a place where the frontier dream of infinite possibilities lingers, somehow linked to the plethora of sky and paucity of people. Never mind that most of the immigrants arrive in such places as Denver or Salt Lake City. City dwellers here are sustained by the knowledge they can drive to the wilds on the weekend. Urban or rural, we're all wrapped up in the ambiguous promise of awesome space.

To some, the geography of the Rockies translates into economic opportunity. To others, an easygoing lifestyle. To others, the invigoration of wild country. However we interpret it, the land has its hold on us.

But from that bit of common ground, modern Rocky Mountain society gets complicated. We can't be represented by just any old tall glass of water in a Stetson, or by our 20-mule-team President Reagan, or by anyone else sufficiently squinty eyed and tanned to appeal to the nation's sense of nostalgia about the Old West. While the region may uniformly wrinkle our faces, it has much less predictable effects on our minds.

For a sample of the kind of philosophical diversity that the Rockies have spawned, take a look at the region's elected representatives. Arizona has handed the political reins to such philosophical opposites as Gov. Bruce Babbitt (D) and Sen. Barry Goldwater (R). Colorado is similarly eclectic in its support of liberal Sen. Gary Hart (D) and conservative Sen. Bill Armstrong (R). In Montana, mostly Democrats are sent to Washington. In Wyoming and Utah, the reverse is true. Yet all three states have Democratic governors.

Even with all the diversity these choices reflect, outsiders continue to try to pigeonhole us according to their own prejudices about "The West." According to the *Washington Post* in a recent story on oil and gas leasing near Jackson Hole, "Grizzly bears have long outnumbered avowed environmentalists in Wyoming." That's our rude frontier image, while reality has political candidates of both parties vying with one another for environmentalists' approval. Some of our states boast the toughest air quality and strip mine laws in the nation.

During the Sagebrush Rebellion, *Newsweek* put a cowboy on its pages to talk about the region's gripes with the federal government. The nation understandably got the impression that the West's wishes were the cowboy's: to get the federal government out of the land management business.

Never mind that an independent poll showed that a majority of Westerners did not support the rebellion. Media attention made it seem a significant revolt against centralized authority. The myth of a unified Western front was perpetuated.

The Sagebrush Rebels' tale held plenty of appeal. It was a well-staged kick in the teeth to a bureaucracy that has few friends in the West, performed by crusty Old West characters who seemed to have the support of the president and all the others who counted in the administration. It was a bit like one of those Saturday afternoon movies. Action, power, colorful characters — it was all there to be made over by the national press.

But when, after the 1980 election, the powerful types backed off in their support for the rebels, the press lost interest. After *Newsweek* heard that Interior Secretary James Watt had "defused" the rebellion by making the federal government a "good neighbor" in Western states, the magazine declared that the rebellion was dead. The angry minority of ranchers was as engagingly pugnacious as ever, but the power element had dropped out of the equation. The movement instantly lost the spotlight.

The Sagebrush Rebellion episode is instructive because it reflects the nation's penchant for oversimplifying the politics of the Rocky Mountain West. Square-jawed Nevada rancher Dean Rhoads, who was dubbed the father of the rebellion, so thoroughly fit the stereotype of the Rockies' inhabitants that, for a while, he was allowed to speak for them.

His voice carried partly because he looked like something out of the West's past, like someone close to the land.

Sometimes we within the region are willing to buy this kind of blarney ourselves. Local politicians all try to dazzle us with their earthiness. Everyone who has ever ridden a horse or plucked a chicken tells voters he or she has a ranching background when running for office. One can be a technotwit, a businessman, a flower child or even a woman and win elections here, but it helps if one also knows how to swing a rope, or at least a fly rod.

Wyoming's senior senator, Malcolm Wallop (R), a Yale graduate whose parents were born in England, is locally famous for a commercial he used in the 1976 election campaign showing a cowboy riding a horse dragging an outhouse from the saddle. A clever protest to a federal rule requiring businesses to supply restrooms for workers, the ad had just the right impact. It supported our image of ourselves as independent rustics, quintessential Westerners, still brave and free enough to scoff at the feds.

The only trouble is that this quintessential Westerner striding about in a land of unlimited opportunity doesn't exist. He probably never existed, outside of our minds. The West is a "perpetual mirage," according to historian Walter Prescott Webb, an unrealizable ideal that brought people across the country and then one-third of the way back, not to a land of plenty, but to one of deprivation and scarcity.

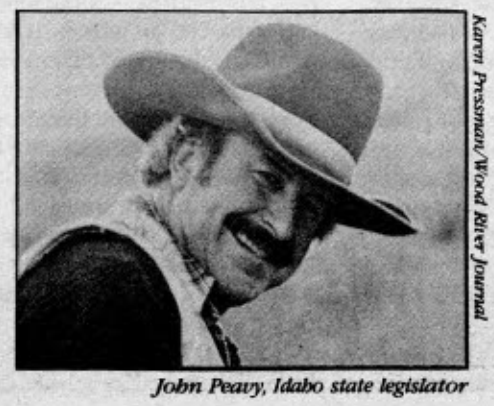
A contemporary Colorado historian, Robert G. Athearn, said of the nation's unrealistic dreams for the Rockies: "It was here that the westward projection of the agrarian myth died, the cult of pioneering, as it had been known for generations, collapsed against the Rockies."

Or should have collapsed. But as we all know, the myth lives on in the country's economic and personal fancies about the West. If anything holds the settlers of this region together, it's a common hopefulness about this place as an economic or spiritual retreat. These expectations have a reasonable chance of being fulfilled. The Rockies are a pleasant, sparsely populated place to live, with a growing diversity of economic opportunities. The established residents are still, in most places, friendly and accepting.

But they must sometimes grimace at the excessive romanticism of some folks in town — especially those with big schemes who expect more than the land or the tiny town they've chosen can give. The realists are not the shakers who get calls from *Newsweek*. They are the people whose families and fortunes were around when the myth of the infinite frontier collapsed, who've quietly learned to live through lean times in harsh dry country. Or they are people who don't have such a long personal history in the region, but who have somehow gained a thorough understanding of their home and an acceptance of its limitations.

From the times of the beaver boom to the energy boom, the well-adapted few have had to endure the upheavals caused by influxes of people with a different attitude — the ones who act on pure pluck and determination, the ones who have bought the-sky's-the-limit myth of the West. They are still around today, reinforcing the stereotypes of journalists and other observers who think they've got us pegged.

Our diminishing water supplies, eroding soils and darkening city skies are evidence of this modern hubris. In a way so is our region's peculiar political schizophrenia. If we could come to a consensus about our natural limits and potentials, perhaps we wouldn't tear off in so many political directions. Perhaps we wouldn't be so susceptible to the Madison Avenue cowboy hype fed to us by the national press and our own politicians. Perhaps we could work together to build a place where the land's the limit, and the heart and mind are free.



Karen Pressman/Wood River Journal

John Peavy, Idaho state legislator

Jody Stroganoff/ Colorado Statesman

BLM Director Bob Burford

Rod Nash

Ed Dobson, FOE