

INSIDE: Letters/6

# High Country News

December 16, 1991

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A Paper for People who Care about the West

One dollar



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Frank and Deborah Popper in the Great Plains to debate their Buffalo Commons concept

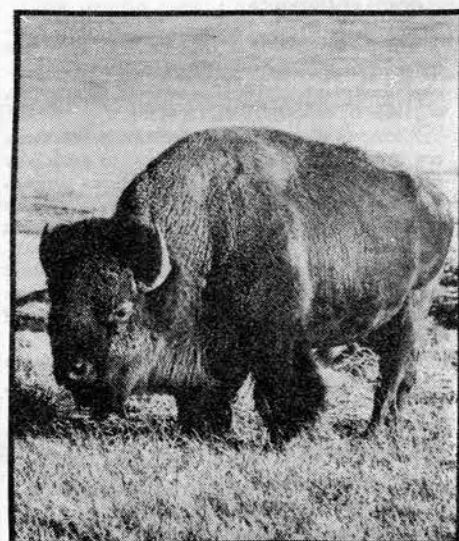
## Are the bison coming?

*Frank and Deborah Popper see themselves as Paul Reveres, carrying a timely, well-meant warning to the Great Plains. But most Great Plains residents see the two New Jersey academics as alarmists, and their Buffalo Commons idea as malicious.*

*Story begins on page 8.*



John P. George



John P. George

## Dear friends,



## HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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## McPhee is her model

The perceptive "fly-on-the-wall" reporting of Anne Matthews, 34, dominates this issue of *High Country News*. Matthews is a free-lancer who also teaches writing at Princeton University, where she earned a master's degree in art and archaeology.

Deborah and Frank Popper, the subjects of Matthews' book, *Where the Buffalo Roam*, say they have enjoyed the intense experience of being observed and recorded. "She wants to be the John McPhee of her generation," Frank Popper says, "only funnier and looser."

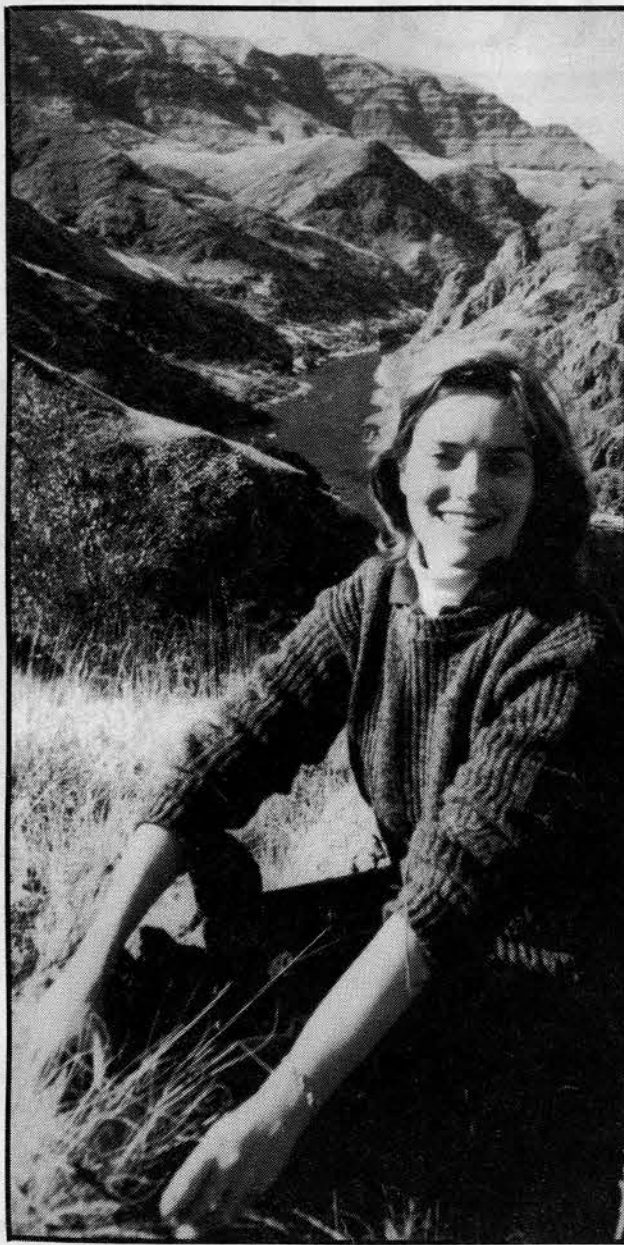
## Visitors

Visitors have been sparse these recent weeks. But Steve Ruby of Boulder, Colo., came to Paonia to visit his acupuncturist and to say hello to *High Country News*. Doug Schroeder, political director of the Colorado Democratic Party, and David Cunningham of the House Majority Fund, both of Denver, also found their way into town over the icy roads.

High Country Foundation board member Bert Fingerhut drove over from Aspen with spouse Caroline Hicks to tour *HCN's* new building and to talk about the state of the region. In theory, Bert retired to Aspen several years ago after a career in New York as a stock analyst. But his retirement has gone awry due to heavy involvement with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Grand Canyon Trust and other organizations.

Marion Stewart, who moved to Paonia recently from Sheboygan, Wis., stopped by to say hello and subscribe. She was the art and dance reporter and a

columnist for the Sheboygan newspaper. Her husband, Robert Piper, is a potter. Another new resident, Katherine Sabatke, also came in to subscribe. She and her husband, Todd, recently bought the Tri-R liquor store in Hotchkiss after moving here from Maryland.



Author Anne Matthews

Louis Hand

## Move is imminent

The contractor tells us that the remodelling of *HCN's* future home should be completed by Christmas, which means the move across the street will occur in early January.

The timing is perfect because *HCN* skips the first issue in January, giving us time to settle into the new quarters. The saga of the new building is still unfolding; we will tell it in this column in the next issue.

## Threat to green reporting

When Tom Bell founded *High Country News* in 1970 in Lander, Wyo., it had a monopoly on environmental reporting in the West. Stories about the problems of strip-mining, power plant construction, river damming and logging were ignored by the West's daily and weekly newspapers. Or they saw these changes not as threats but as economic development.

Starting in the late 1970s and extending through much of the 1980s, local newspapers discovered environmental issues, and *HCN* had to share its beat with an increasing number of skilled reporters employed by newspapers willing to allocate space to environmental stories. For a while, the staff joked that *HCN* had made itself obsolete.

Lately, however, the trend toward more and better environmental reporting by the region's mainstream press has appeared to reverse itself. Several months ago, reporter Richard Manning told how the *Missoulian* had transferred him away from environmental reporting because of his stories on the clear-cutting industry in western Montana (*HCN*, 9/23/91). Now, page three of this issue describes why reporter Steve Stuebner left the *Idaho Statesman* in Boise.

Manning quit the *Missoulian* because the paper was hostile to stories that criticized logging. But Stuebner's experience appears to have had more to do with the changing nature of journalism. Environmental stories do not lend themselves to short, simple stories of the *USA Today* style.

That trend is more serious than simple economic bias because a *USA Today* can never do a good job — even if it overcomes its pro-industry bias. Papers like it have adopted a philosophy that does not allow reporters to communicate information to their readers. They are run by people who do not believe that readers are capable of understanding complex issues.

In theory, we suppose, *High Country News* should be pleased. Thanks to this trend, *HCN* may regain its in-region monopoly on environmental issues. Increasingly, our main competition for the articles *HCN* does will be the high-quality national and regional dailies such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*.

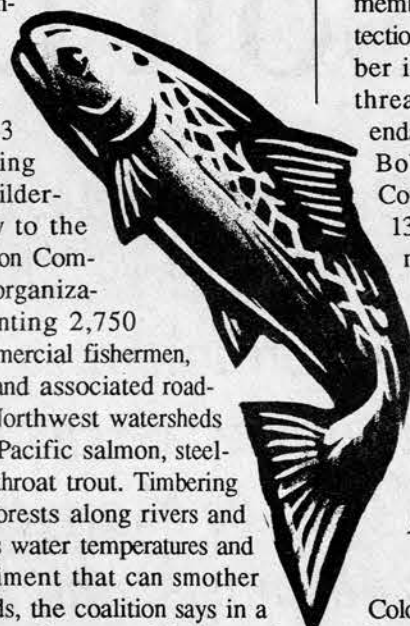
It's a monopoly we would happily do without.

— Ed Marston, for the staff

## HOTLINE

## Coalition fights for fish

Conservationists have joined with commercial and sport-fishing groups to save the Northwest's dwindling fish stocks. A coalition of 43 groups ranging from The Wilderness Society to the Oregon Salmon Commission, an organization representing 2,750 licensed commercial fishermen, say logging and associated road-building in Northwest watersheds are harming Pacific salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout. Timbering old-growth forests along rivers and streams raises water temperatures and releases sediment that can smother spawning beds, the coalition says in a Nov. 4 letter to Congress. Members of the unlikely alliance are calling on Congress and federal land agencies to



place large tracts of old-growth forests off limits to logging, a move that could cost the region 200 million to 350 million board-feet of timber annually, enough to support 3,000-4,000 jobs. While coalition members admit increased old-growth protection will hurt the region's sluggish timber industry, they say a failure to act threatens more than the Northwest's endangered spotted owl. According to Bob Doppelt of the Oregon Rivers Council, the fishing industry generates 13,000 jobs and \$250 million to \$500 million annually for his state. "If you continue to lose more aquatic habitat, the fisheries will diminish and the jobs will diminish. So while the previous discussion was jobs vs. owls, now we are talking jobs vs. jobs," Doppelt told AP.

## Lethal cyanide leaks

Repeated cyanide leaks from one of Colorado's largest gold mines have killed all aquatic life in 17 miles of the Alamosa River and the Terrace Reservoir in southern Colorado. Since opening in 1986, Sum-

mitville Consolidated Mining Co. has leaked enough cyanide to destroy a popular fishing spot. The most recent spill came in October, when 500-1,000 gallons of the contaminated water seeped into a creek. The mine, located 16 miles from Wolf Creek Pass in southern Colorado, uses some 50 million gallons of cyanide-laced water each year to leach gold from ore, general manager Bill Williams told *The Denver Post*. About 100 gallons of the water leak from the mine every minute. "We've got problems, there is no question about that," he said. A Colorado Health Department video of a spill last summer shows brightly colored sludge oozing into waterways. "I was appalled," said Mark Hughes, an attorney with the Sierra Club Legal Defense fund. "There seemed to be substantial leaks and runoffs, and ... operators didn't seem to know where it came from or what might be in it." The leaks persist although the state fined the company \$100,000 in July. The company says it has discontinued mining operations but will continue the leaching process until spring. After that, detoxification of the leach pad "will literally take years," said Pat Nelson of the Colorado Water Quality Division.

## WESTERN ROUNDUP

# Environmental reporter quits in Idaho

Steve Stuebner, a veteran environmental reporter for Idaho's largest newspaper, has quit his job after five years. He says he is one of a growing number of journalists falling victim to a subtle form of censorship.

While Steve Stuebner's former boss says no such pressure existed, other reporters covering natural resource issues in the West say the environmental news can be tainted by the power of timber and other industries.

Starting in 1986, Stuebner covered environmental issues for Boise's *Idaho Statesman* until he quit the paper Oct. 28. The end came when his boss, managing editor Bill Steinauer, told him to cover city government rather than the environment.

"I felt that was a real kick in the teeth, given my aggressive coverage of environmental issues for the *Statesman* over five years," Stuebner said. He covered issues such as the expansion of the Mountain Home bombing range, controversial sales of federal timber and water use.

He blames his lost job on managers who don't have the courage to allow aggressive reporting.

In performance interviews, Stuebner's bosses told him his stories often had environmentalists taking the offensive, with resource users on the defensive, he said. They also charged that Stuebner used emotionally loaded language.

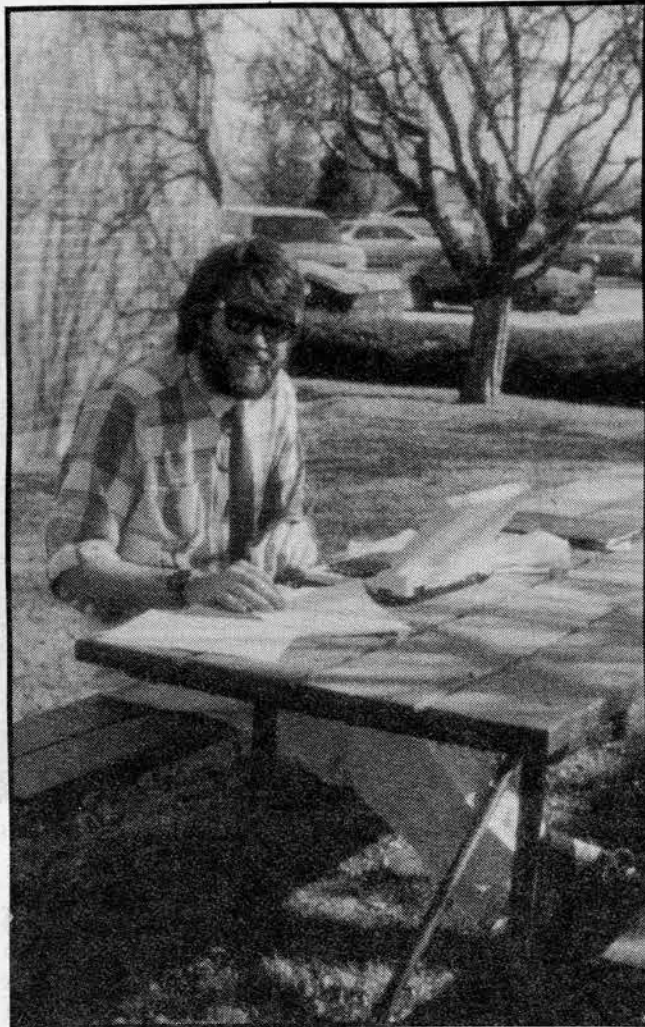
His coverage reflected political reality, in that environmentalists are often the ones "stirring up the pot," Stuebner said. As for his choice of words, "I consider that good writing, good reporting."

The *Statesman* is so concerned about upsetting readers, advertisers or powerful elements of the Boise community that it settles for "milquetoast reporting," Stuebner said.

Another problem, he added, is that the Gannett Corp., which owns the *Statesman*, emphasizes very short stories. "Just by length alone they are censoring news. They think readers have a tiny attention span — like that of a 2-year-old — because of TV." He disagreed with that policy, which was another reason "I fell into disfavor," Stuebner said.

Steinauer declined to comment on Stuebner's reporting. But he did say Stuebner's shift from the environmental beat was part of a shuffling of beats throughout the paper aimed at keeping reporters fresh.

"We've never had any pressure to



Former *Statesman* reporter Steve Stuebner

release anyone from a beat," he said. And if the paper received such pressure, it would not bow to it, he added.

Stuebner's case sounds familiar to that of Dick Manning, a former environmental reporter for the *Missoulian* in Missoula, Mont.

In 1988, Manning wrote a series of articles on overcutting of corporate timber lands. The series won the paper an award; the paper kept the prize but moved Manning to another beat, saying he could no longer cover timber issues objectively (*HCN*, 9/23/91).

Instead of switching, Manning quit.

"It's more than a trend," Manning said of his and Stuebner's fate. In the West, where the economy is dependent on resource-extracting industry, few papers have the courage to question the actions of those industries, he says.

Manning is now promoting a book he wrote on Montana timber and newspapers, and says he hears from more and more reporters under such pressure.

"Anyone who is covering the environmental beat is feeling it in one way or another," Manning said. "It takes incredible fortitude to stand up to it."

Jim Detjin, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Society of Environmental Journalists, agrees. "Virtually every veteran environmental writer I know has been threatened with the loss of his or her job at one time or another," he said in the fall *SEJ Journal*.

George Rede, assistant city editor at the *Portland Oregonian*, is no stranger to the pressure. Last summer, he oversaw a series of investigative articles about excessive logging in his state.

Almost immediately, user groups such as the Oregon Forest Industries Council and the Northwest Forest Resources Council went over Rede's head to complain to the paper's publisher. The forest resources council compiled an 88-page critique of the series, charging everything from misquoted statements to

omitted facts.

"I've never seen anything like that," Rede said. But he said the paper knew its reporting was sound. "In a nutshell, we stood behind our reporters."

Kathy Durbin, who did much of the reporting on the series, is reluctant to discuss the pressure she experienced during her investigation or after her work was published.

"There's always pressure. Oregon still basically has a natural-resource based economy ... (Ranching and logging) practices are in the political limelight," she said, passing questions about the issue on to Rede. "I have a tough job."

Rede says the *Oregonian's* reputation and financial independence made it able to stand up to the timber industry. Smaller papers, particularly in mill towns, likely couldn't take the pressure if they wanted to tackle timber issues at all, he said.

— Ben Long

The writer works for the *Idahonian* in Moscow, Idaho.

## HOTLINE

### Mining Law remains unchanged

The 1872 Mining Law will stand unchanged for 1991 at least. The House Interior Committee put off a bill to overhaul the 119-year-old mining act until Congress reconvenes in January (*HCN*, 11/4/91). A revised bill, sponsored by Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., chairperson of Interior's Mining and Natural Resources Subcommittee, is expected to be re-introduced at the beginning of the 1992 session. In the meantime, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee will hold field hearings Dec. 18, in Salt Lake City, Utah, on an even stricter reform bill sponsored by Sen. Dale Bumpers, D-Ark. For more information about the hearing, call the Energy Committee at 202/224-4971.



Wyoming Travel Commission

### Bear hunt is scaled down

Colorado's spring black bear hunt will be almost eliminated over the next three years as a result of a plan recently approved by the state Division of Wildlife. During a hearing attended by 150 people, the commission voted 5-3 to approve regulations that reduce the number of spring bear licenses and restrict the use of bait and hunting dogs. Next year, 50 percent of the bear hunting licenses will be sold for the spring season, while the other half will be sold for the fall hunt. But by 1994, only 10 percent of the licenses will be sold for the spring hunt. Strewing bait to attract bears and allowing dogs to chase the animals up trees will be restricted to the spring hunt, while only bait can be used in the fall. Environmental, animal rights groups and state wildlife biologists supported the plan, contending that a spring hunt is unfair and environmentally unsound. They said hunters in spring have an unfair advantage over bears still groggy from winter hibernation and females nursing young cubs. Last year six lactating females were killed, leaving the orphaned cubs to die. Proponents of the spring hunt said that slain female bears make up only a small percentage of the 400 bears killed each spring. "Unless bears are proven to be in danger of over-harvest, why change the season?" bear hunter Stan Snyder asked *The Denver Post*. "Six bears lactating or with cubs is not a significant number." Opinion polls show that the majority of Colorado voters oppose the spring season as well as the use of bait and dogs. "Using bait to entice bears that have just come out of hibernation is not hunting," Ross Thenhaus said at the hearing. "It is a cowardly act."

## HOTLINE

### Giant bear skeleton found

A team of researchers recently discovered the West's first complete skeleton of a carnivorous bear that lived more than 11,000 years ago. The scientists found the remains in a New Mexico cave after lowering themselves 210 feet to the pitch-black floor. There they discovered the fully articulated skeleton of a giant, short-nosed bear, an inhabitant of the Pleistocene epoch. Remains of *Arctodus simus* — thought to be larger and sleeker than a modern grizzly — have been found throughout the United States, but articulated skeletons are rare. "Usually you just find teeth and limb bones," said

Elaine Anderson, a paleontologist at the Denver Museum of Natural History. The bear initially fell 30 feet onto a ledge where claw marks on the wall indicate a desperate attempt at escape before it hurtled 180 feet to its death. Before becoming extinct, the species ranged from Mexico to Alaska and was the dominant predator of its time. Thomas Stafford, a member of the research team and a researcher at the University of Colorado's Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, said that the bear's lower limbs were elongated like those of cursorial, or running, animals. "(This bear) could run down a deer or elk," said Stafford. Its teeth are sharper and larger than modern, omnivorous bears, an indication that the creature's diet consisted exclusively of meat. Stafford removed a small bone

sample for testing but said the rest of the skeleton will remain in the cave.

## BARBS

Picture yourself on a boat in Las Vegas, on a toxic river where gondoliers sing ...

In an effort to boost lagging gaming revenues in Las Vegas, Nev., business people are considering a \$40 million proposal to make a "desert Venice" out of city streets. Resort owner Steve Wynn would turn downtown into a network of Venetian waterways, AP reports. Plans also include a \$700,000 system that would draw and cleanse water from an aquifer that is currently polluted with chemicals and dissolved salts.

# Trust fund belonging to Navajos has been bled dry

A report released last month by the Utah legislative auditor general says that millions of dollars in oil royalties belonging to Navajos in Utah have been wasted, misappropriated and stolen.

Much of the royalty trust fund, amounting to \$60 million over the last 30 years, has been misspent by tribal officials while the state of Utah looked the other way, says the audit. Now the state as trustee must address how to police the fund better while still giving Navajos the control they demand.

For decades the state of Utah has neglected its trust duties despite evidence that monies were being misspent, says the report.

For the 6,500 Navajos living in San Juan County, Utah, on a small strip of the reservation, the audit confirms what many have long believed: Their interests fall through the cracks of tribal, state and county governments, and even their local representatives betray them.

"The audit is very embarrassing for the reservation," says Chester Johnson, a Navajo who serves on the 11-member Dineh Committee, the branch of the Utah government entrusted with administering the trust fund. "We knew all along something was going on, but this confirms it."

"The audit reads like a cheap novel," says Utah's Republican House Speaker Craig Moody, one of the legislators who requested the investigation. "The sad thing is it's true."

The report has prompted Utah Governor Norm Bangerter to order a freeze on all expenditures of the rapidly shrinking fund.

"I am appalled at the waste, mismanagement and fraud on the part of various recipients of the trust funds," says Bangerter.

Some of the royalty money, says the 88-page audit, was used to bribe Navajo officials, to finance unsound business ventures and to support Indian services that should have been funded by state, federal or tribal governments.

When Congress created Utah's 130-mile-long Aneth portion of the Navajo Reservation in 1933, Navajos living there were made the beneficiaries of 37.5 percent of the royalties from any oil or gas found on the land. The money, said Congress, was to be managed by the state of Utah on behalf of its resident Navajos.

The remaining 62.5 percent of the trust was to go directly to tribal headquarters in Window Rock, Ariz. The vast majority of the 200,000-member tribe lives within that state.

Since the discovery of the bountiful Aneth oil field in 1956, however, much of the royalty money has bypassed the Utah Navajos, one of the poorest populations on the reservation.

Despite 350 million barrels of crude oil flowing from Aneth over the last 30 years, nearly 75 percent of the 6,500 Navajos there do not have drinking water or electricity. Aneth's poverty rate is more than three times higher than Utah's average (HCN, 7/30/91).

In an effort to gain better control of the trust fund and rescue their community from political isolation, six Utah Navajos ran for San Juan County government seats in 1990. Five of them lost in the Mormon-dominated southern county (HCN, 12/3/90). Nevertheless, the political effort drew national attention and prompted the state last year to begin the trust fund audit.

The results are no surprise to those living in San Juan County. The report



Patrick Bagley for the Salt Lake Tribune

says the Utah portion of the trust has been wasted and is fast disappearing. Of \$60 million earned, only \$9.5 million remains, says the audit. The trust's balance has declined 62 percent since 1972. The audit faults the state and tribal officials for poor management.

"Problems with trust fund management result from failures of its governance system," states the report.

Three separate administrative bodies determine how trust monies are spent. The Utah Navajo Development Council (UNDC), a non-profit company, was set up in 1971 to disperse trust monies to tribal beneficiaries in the form of health, education and housing assistance.

## 'The audit reads like a cheap novel.'

— Craig Moody

Utah Navajo Industries (UNI), a for-profit subsidiary of UNDC, received grants and loans from the trust to finance Navajo businesses. Utah's Division of Indian Affairs, a state arm, essentially rubber-stamped all spending by the two organizations, say auditors.

In fact, says the report, several people appointed by the governor to oversee the trust fund directly benefited from fund expenditures.

The state report identifies numerous instances of wasteful spending by officials at the Utah Navajo Development Council, including "unnecessary" land purchases, "lavish" awards and incentives, and "extravagant" retreats and parties. During this period, the company laid off medical staff and cut health and education programs.

Over the years, the Utah Navajo Development Council has received \$29 million in trust monies, or half of Utah's share of the royalty fund. "Unless UNDC's consumption of trust funds is brought under control, the fund will soon be exhausted," says the report.

Even more egregious was spending by Utah Navajo Industries, the subsidiary of UNDC created to stimulate economic development on the reservation. Every business it started has ended

in failure or bankruptcy. One notable example of poor business judgement was the construction of a marina in a flood plain near Lake Powell against the recommendation of the National Park Service. The multimillion dollar structure washed away in a flash flood in 1989, just a year after construction.

The president of the for-profit company from 1988 to 1990, Daniel Mariano, appears to have "wrongfully diverted" between \$20,000 and \$100,000 with UNI credit cards, say auditors. Other officials often received money and favors.

"UNI has suffered from bad management, which combined repeatedly poor business decisions with unethical behavior," states the audit. Such behavior includes "wasteful spending, related-party transactions and poor organizational control."

Harry Sloan, a board member of Utah Navajo Industries since 1989, says the audit should have been done years ago. UNI, he says, has been an impossible company to control.

"As a board member, I asked a lot of questions, but never got any answers," says Sloan, a Navajo. "I requested financial information and never got it. It was difficult to make decisions, and there was a lack of technical capability on the part of management plus a mixture of special interests."

Sloan also says the state of Utah should be faulted, and possibly sued, for failing to manage the trust fund properly.

Dan McCool, associate professor of political science at the University of Utah, agrees.

"Under the federal law that set up the trust fund, it's hard to see how the state is not liable for the abuse and mismanagement of the fund."

UNDC president Dick Neztosie says the state audit is biased and places too much blame on Navajos and not enough on non-Indian administrators.

"We took an unfair beating," says Neztosie, who has run UNDC since 1990. "Obviously there was some major mismanagement with UNI, enough to break the company, but we take exception to many of the suppositions about UNDC."

With the state freezing funding of the development council this year, the

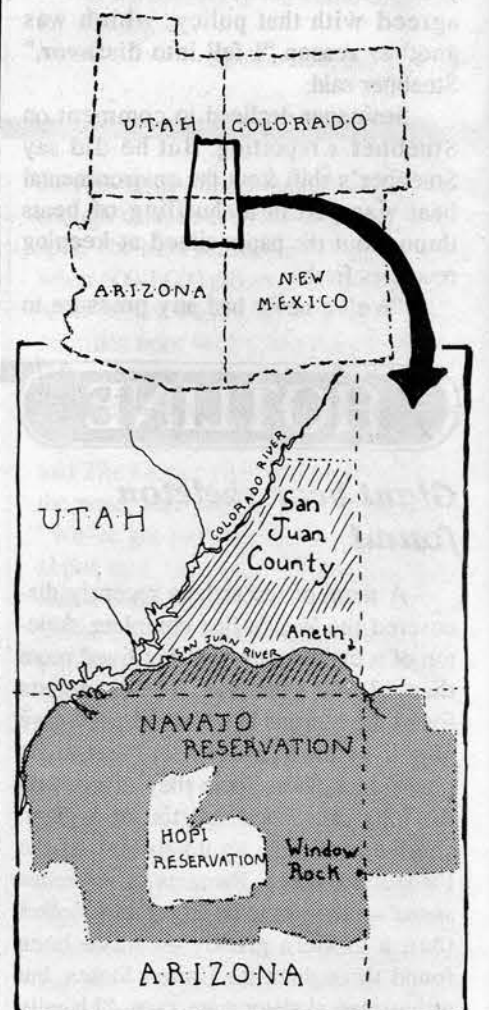
organization must lay off half its staff and reduce needed services, says Neztosie. "It's not fair to penalize 6,500 Navajos for this."

To make up for lost services, the federally-funded Indian Health Services will take over operations of the council's medical facilities, a switch state auditors say should have happened a long time ago.

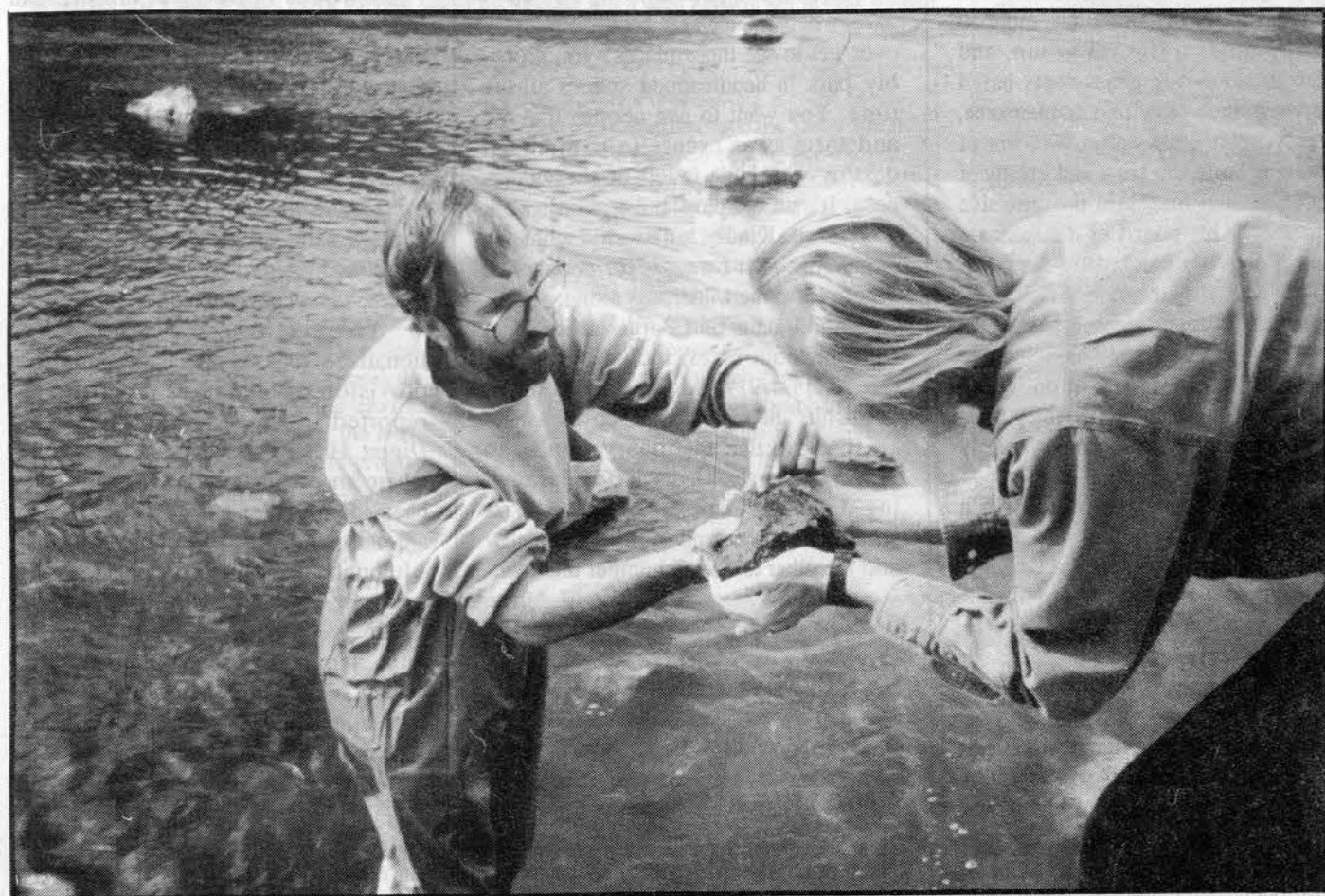
Meanwhile, the state and the reservation are struggling to come up with a better way to manage and spend the royalties.

Gov. Bangerter says the state has never been effective in managing the trust because of conflicts with Navajos. "The state cannot exercise its duties as a trustee without taking away the self-determination of the Navajo people," concludes Bangerter, a Democrat. He says he wants the state removed as trustee unless it can exercise more control over how monies are spent.

Continued on next page



Diane Sylvain



Steve Stuebner

Peter Bowler shows a friend a cluster of Bliss Rapids snails from the Snake River

## Tiny snails could affect eight dams

BLISS, Idaho — Decked out in chest waders, Peter Bowler leans over and pulls a boulder out of the Snake River. Clinging to the rock's underside are the heroes of a geological epic — snails.

The Bliss Rapids snail, along with about 30 other species in the Snake, descended from ancient Lake Idaho some 3.4 million years ago. Once upon a time, 90 million species of snails resided in the lake, but cataclysmic events caused it to drain and carve out what is now Hells Canyon. Somehow a few species persevered.

Today, 600,000 years later, the snails appear to be declining due to pollution and development. That decline has political clout, however; as candidates for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the snails could threaten eight proposed dam projects on the Snake River.

Bowler, a biology professor at the University of California in Irvine, grew up on the banks of the Snake River in southwestern Idaho. When he was 10, he used to tag along with biologist Dwight Taylor as he inspected the riverbed for snails. Bowler knew the Latin names of the tiny mollusks by the time he entered junior high school. Now he spends every summer back home, looking for snails in the river and in the bellies of the trout he catches.

"Even when I was a kid, this place was crawling with snails. But now the water quality is crashing, and the snails are dying," the energetic Bowler says.

Bowler's declining counts, in addition to Taylor's documentation of the snails' shrinking range, led him to file a petition to list the Snake River physa snail and Bliss Rapids snail as endangered species in 1980. In 1987, he petitioned to list the Idaho Springs snail as endangered. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also received petitions to list the Banbury Springs limpet and Utah valvata as endangered in 1989.

Last December, the service published its intent to recommend protecting the snails in the Federal Register. All five species are found within the 250-mile Middle Snake reach, between American Falls and King Hill. Where there is pure, spring-fed water gushing into the Snake, the clean-water-loving snails live in highest concentration.

The Banbury Springs limpet, discovered by Seattle malacologist Terry Fresk, is the rarest of the five species under review. It has been found in only two sites, one in Box Canyon and another in Banbury Springs.

Bowler's petition cites proposed dams in the Bliss area and water pollution as the key threats to snails. A fish farm slated for the Box Canyon area could also jeopardize the Banbury Springs limpet. Furthermore, poor water quality has allowed "junk" species, such as the mud snail, to overcrowd the available habitat and squeeze out the natives, Bowler says.

"The ecological cemetery of reservoirs up the Columbia to the mangled Middle Snake River has already spelled the end for our migratory fish. This is our last chance to grasp the biodiversity we have left," Bowler says.

Protection for the snails may boil down to a debate about the species' numbers. Snail advocates face stiff opposition from the Idaho Farm Bureau, Idaho Aquaculture Association and Idaho Power Co., which have hired their own specialists to document new snail population figures. So far, they have succeeded in finding new pockets of snails never documented before.

Industry officials blasted the Fish and Wildlife Service for ignoring population

studies conducted in 1987 and 1989. Idaho Power Co., which plans to build a high dam on the Middle Snake, asked the agency to withdraw its proposal to list the snails because of inadequate data.

"The omission of (the 1987 and 1989) studies is an exclusion of 25 percent of the known sources of information," said Dave Meyers, a company spokesman. "This is a serious failure to apply the statutory standard of basing a decision on the best scientific and commercial data available ... Idaho Power believes the proposed rule should be withdrawn because of lack of basic biological information."

If Fish and Wildlife lists the species, it could affect the operations of fish farms, potato plants and feedlots. Even with the recently discovered pockets of snails, there is enough data to justify the mollusks' protection, Bowler says. "Adding a few more dots on the map doesn't mean anything," he said. "The point is the whole system is going down."

The agency has until December to determine whether adequate data exist to list the species.

For more information, contact U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4696 Overland Road, Boise, ID 83705 (208/334-1934).

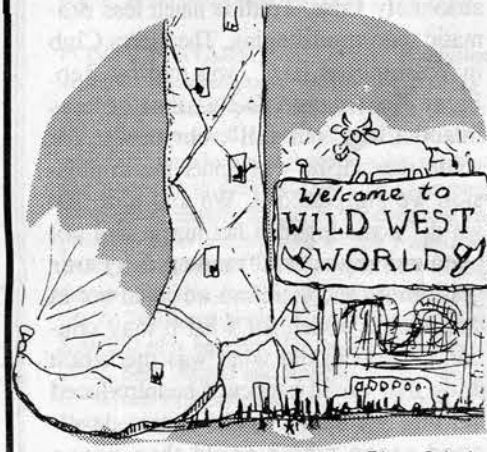
— Stephen Stuebner

The writer used to work for the *Idaho Statesman*.

## HOTLINE

### Wyoming county seeks nuclear dump

Faced with tough economic times, Wyoming's Fremont County is considering playing host to nuclear waste. County officials are applying for a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to determine if Gas Hills, a 10,000-acre abandoned uranium mine site, is a suitable home for spent nuclear fuel rods. "This is all very early," Fremont County Commissioner Tom Satterfield told the *Casper Star-Tribune*. "But if this did fly it could bring in a needed boost to the economy of this county." If approved, the Gas Hills storage site would be part of a network of what the DOE calls "monitored retrievable storage." The federal government hopes to have a permanent disposal site open at Nevada's Yucca Mountain by 2010, and plans to use interim sites until then (*HCN*, 11/4/81). Although State Sen. Robert Peck, R-Fremont, supports the nuclear dump, not everyone in the county agrees. "We do have some very serious questions and concerns," said Stephanie Kessler, director of the Lander-based Wyoming Outdoor Council. "If Yucca Mountain doesn't get sited, will Fremont County become a permanent facility for the country?"



Diane Sylvain

### The elevator cowboy

A consortium of developers has hired a Texas artist to build a 275-foot cowboy — the largest statue in the world — to preside over a proposed theme park in western Montana. The statue would have elevators running up and down a hollow leg. Visitors to the \$600 million Wild West World would also be able to pan for gold, battle bandits on top of steam trains and brand cattle. "Wild West World fills a major void in that it provides a single destination, a gigantic shopping mall, if you will ..." said investor Clarke Richter of Worland, Wyo., in the *Billings Gazette*.

## Navajo fund was misspent ...

*Continued from previous page*

"There are two competing interests at work," explains Bangerter aide Enid Green. "On the one hand, the state has obligations to make sure the trust is administered well. But the Navajos want to decide for themselves how to spend the money. As soon as they do that, the state has no control. It leaves the state in a no-win situation."

"Our hands have been tied," agrees House Speaker Moody. "Can we really be a proper trustee if we have no ability to manage the fund? If we can't find a way to do the job properly as a trustee, then it would behoove us to petition Congress to take that

responsibility away."

But many Navajos in Utah want the state to remain as trustee, says Mark Maryboy, an Aneth delegate to the Navajo Nation and a San Juan County commissioner. They fear if control of the trust resides at tribal headquarters in Arizona, no money will return to Utah, he says.

"Utah Navajos should continue to manage through the Dineh Committee and the Navajo chapter houses in Utah," says Maryboy.

"Right now, 62.5 percent of the trust is going to the tribe, but we're not getting services from them," agrees Victoria Joe, a school teacher who serves on the Dineh Committee.

The tribal government in Window Rock, for its part, wants the royalty money to complement the portion of the trust it already receives. "We won't fail to do the job like the state of Utah did," says tribal spokesman Duane Beyer. "A lot depends on what the Utah Navajos want."

For a copy of "A performance audit of the Utah Navajo Trust Fund," written by Deputy Auditor General Douglas E. West, contact the Office of the Legislative Auditor General, 412 State Capitol, Salt Lake City, UT 84114 (801) 538-1033. The 88-page report is available free of charge.

— Florence Williams

Florence Williams is a staff reporter at *High Country News*.

## LETTERS

## SIERRA CLUB SPIRIT IS STRONG

Dear HCN,

Sierra Club volunteers and staff were startled to learn that they "lack a strong, green spirit" (*HCN*, 10/21/91). When we take an occasional break from writing letters, running phone banks, attending hearings and meetings, organizing, and lobbying to protect the environment, club volunteers and staff don't usually get attacked by their allies. Our hardworking volunteers and staff, of whom we are proud, were appalled by the article. In the many allegations in this article, the author attempts to create the impression that the Sierra Club is an organization too quick to compromise. This just isn't so; neither are the other claims, all of which are misleading or false.

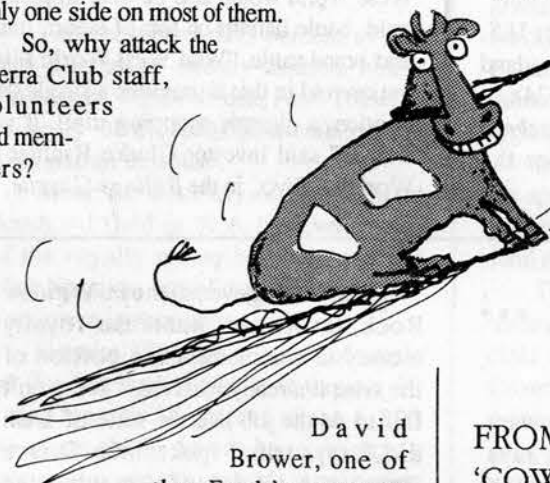
To cite just one, the Sierra Club is accused of trashing a wilderness bill for the Northern Rockies. It is correct that the Sierra Club does not support this bill. A great number of other national, statewide and regional groups also do not. Its supporters have not bothered to directly contact the relevant grass-roots entities of the club to ask for that support, let alone have a discussion of its merits and problems with the club activists in the affected regions.

This allegation also seemed to indicate we would lie to a member of Congress to further our strategy. This is absolutely false. Truth is much less dramatic than mudslinging. The Sierra Club in Washington, D.C., was told by Rep. Peter Kostmayer, D-Pa., that he was introducing "our bill"; obviously, for some reason, he was under the impression we supported it. We told him that we did not support it because it had not been reviewed and endorsed by our grass-roots and therefore we could not in confidence vouch for what it may contain. When asked what was the worst thing that could happen if he introduced the bill, we said it might contain developed areas which could then prove embarrassing to the congressman after the wilderness bill was introduced. He asked us to review the bill. We did. It did include developed areas.

Now, months later, it still has not been presented by its supporters to the local club chapters for review and discussion.

There are answers to each of the other charges in the article as well. It is unfortunate that the author chose to present only one side on most of them.

So, why attack the Sierra Club staff, volunteers and members?



David Brower, one of the Earth's greatest defenders and not above giving

the club a solid poke or two over the years, offered a good clue in September: "I consider the Sierra Club, for all our minor differences, the most effective conservation organization on the planet — or any planet." Various groups and individuals trying to enlist that effectiveness are frustrated when the organization does not immediately buy into their proposal.

Those who would enlist the Sierra Club's active support for their cause must seek support among the grass-roots, not berate staff for not being suffi-

ciently "green." The Sierra Club is a truly grass-roots organization, more so than any other national group, and though to some our grass-roots-based priority setting is slow and cumbersome, nonetheless, it works that way out of necessity to build the trust and loyalty of the activists that maintain this effective organization. Our board of directors are volunteer activists elected by the grass-roots; the club's issue priorities and policies are voted on and determined by the grass-roots; local and regional issues are determined by and worked on by the grass-roots of the area. Democracy takes time; it means we do not change a policy without good cause.

The club doesn't claim to have a monopoly on environmental wisdom, but we have our own opinions on strategy, based on experience and knowledge of our own organization, and what we see as politically feasible.

We also appreciate the bold vision of environmental leaders both in and out of the club, whether we agree on strategy or not. Looking ahead and exploring new ideas is vital to the environmental movement. We encourage it. Our public lands activists have applauded efforts by *HCN* to raise public awareness of issues such as western water law, grazing, and mining law. We look forward to a fair assessment of the Sierra Club in *HCN* which might strengthen all our efforts to protect and preserve the Earth.

Judy Anderson, Montrose, California; Mark Pearson, Fort Collins, Colorado; Ed Madej, Helena, Montana; John Osborn, Spokane, Washington; Jim Catlin, Berkeley, California

Judy Anderson is chairperson of the of the National Parks and Wilderness Campaign Steering Committee of the Sierra Club. Other signers are members of that committee.

## 'MACHO DWEEB'

Dear HCN,

I enjoyed the spotted owl article in the Nov. 4 issue. However, lest your readers be left with the impression that the flammulated owl (whose voice is characterized as "brief but assertive") is just another macho dweeb, I feel compelled to point out that this engaging little beast is, vocally, quite the other. Downright languid, I would have to say, and ventriloquial, at least to human ears.

Your northern pygmy owl, in comparison, has a much louder, percussive toot.

Alan Seegert  
Denali Park, Alaska

## FROM WILDERNESS TO 'COWTOWING'

Dear HCN,

Bradford T. Brown's concern for the poor, the employed and those with "limited ... physical abilities" tugs at my heartstrings (*HCN*, 11/4/91). Since I'm retired, old, and have "limited physical abilities" (I spend a fair amount of time in a wheelchair) it's great to have someone like Mr. Brown to defend my right to have roads built and forests flattened so that I can get to those places that used to be wilderness. The next thing he'll ask for on my behalf is probably a cable car to the top of Long's Peak.

Cut the crap, Mr. Brown. You don't care whether I or any blue-collar folk ever get to see those places; you probably park in handicapped spaces all the time. You want to use people like me and them as an excuse to exploit and destroy what little is left of the wilderness. It's an old ploy, but it won't work any more. Kindly let us say what we want. And what I want is for people like you to leave the wilderness alone.

And I guess Bart Barger is for equal time for both sexes, including bovine (*HCN*, 11/4/91). Having talked about "bullshit," he talks about "cowtowing." Go back to that dictionary you're so proud of, Barger. Under K for kowtowing. From the Chinese. "Cowtowing" is when you tie one end of a line to a cow and the other to a truck bumper and tow.

John M. Muste  
Taos, New Mexico

## SYSTEMATIC POISONING

Dear HCN,

Thank you for your report on a federal investigation exposing the poisoning of hundreds of bald and golden eagles by Western sheep ranchers (*HCN*, 10/21/91). Some of those allegedly involved in the killings were "prominent" ranchers from Colorado and Wyoming. One of the accused pesticide traffickers is a predator control consultant working for the Wyoming Department of Agriculture.

Federal investigators confiscated hundreds of pounds of illegal and banned poisons — "enough to kill every man, woman, child and mammal in the western U.S." — according to Galen Buterbaugh, regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should be congratulated for its courageous undercover work in this field. It should also be encouraged to conduct a similar investigation in New Mexico, to determine the extent of illegal predator poisoning operations here.

But our concern should not just be focused on outlaws

misusing highly toxic poisons.

Our own government, under the auspices of the Animal Damage Control program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, continues to use deadly poisons in its official anti-wildlife campaign on behalf of ranchers. Its misuse of predacide poison needs to be addressed as well.

Whether it's done legally by ADC or illegally by renegade ranchers, the systematic poisoning of wildlife is a despicable crime against nature that must be stopped. Anyone concerned about ADC should contact New Mexicans Against ADC, P.O. Box 22335, Santa Fe, NM 87502.

Patricia Wolff  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

## BIASED ON MINING

Dear HCN,

Your article, "Mining law is no longer a sacred cow" (*HCN*, 11/4/91), is biased and distorted by omission of key facts. Steve Hinchman states that:

- miners can claim and develop any mineral deposit on any public lands.
- miners do not pay any royalties or leases to federal or state treasuries.
- miners can convert their claims to private ownership for \$2.50 or \$5.00 an acre.
- miners are not required to reclaim the land or water when they are done.

While it is true that miners can locate claims on Bureau of Land Management or Forest Service lands (but not state lands), mineral deposits in questionable areas will never be successfully permitted (e.g., Mt. Emmons near Crested Butte). Although miners do not pay any federal royalties and the payment of such would render most U.S. mines uneconomic due to low commodity prices, state leases are required.

Yes, there have been isolated, sensationalized abuses under the patenting provision of the law as repetitiously reported in *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest*. However, patents are issued only where an economic mineral deposit has been identified and total per acre costs are closer to \$3,000 to \$8,000 per acre. Although reclamation is not addressed under the 1872 Mining Law, a myriad of existing federal, state and county provisions demand strict compliance and a posted reclamation bond. Most of the environmental damage related to mining occurred around the turn of the century, not as a result of recent activities.

The Bumper and Rahall bills, if passed in their present form, will surely serve their ultimate purpose: They will end mining in the U.S. Not only will that have a dramatic effect on local Western economies, it will eliminate another fundamental U.S. industry that creates wealth and move us closer to the service role that dominates our economy today. Certain provisions of the 1872 Mining Law should be tightened, such as patenting language. We should not totally decimate a body of statutes that has been modified several times over its 119-year history.

Robert A. Lunceford  
Evergreen, Colorado

## FIE ON YOUR 'COMIC FEATURE'

Dear HCN,

Just wanted to let you know that we sure got a chuckle out of your satirical feature on Moab (*HCN*, 11/18/91). How clever of your Ms. Williams to have managed to ferret out so many of our local curmudgeons, misanthropes, reactionaries, failed idealists and downright dunderheads.

Since the article was obviously meant to be humorous, I won't bother to point out the many inaccuracies. Truth is dull, right? Kudos to Ms. Williams: She seems to have discovered that it is much more difficult to write a serious piece that offers a balanced picture than it is simply to take a superficial look at the opinions of a few and then extrapolate to an entire community. Where's the fun in that?

It is possible that some of your readers won't see the tongue-in-cheek aspects of the piece. They won't realize that Moab is still a place of spectacular scenic wilderness, reasonable prices, and friendly people. Well, fie on them, I say! Everyone should be able to recognize a joke when they see it. So, a hearty thank you from those of us who enjoy being part of Moab's tourist industry, who welcome the Jeepers, bikers, hikers, windshield sightseers, rafters, foreigners (yes, even Coloradoans), and who have retained their senses of humor about this whole thing. We look forward to more comic features from *HCN*.

Michaelene Pendleton  
Moab, Utah

# BULLETIN BOARD

## TV STATION GETS GREEN SUPPORT

In Idaho, a public television show about ranchers and grazing damage has fomented a battle over access. After Boise's public television station, KAID, announced it would broadcast "The New Range Wars," Idaho ranchers pressured the program's sponsor into withdrawing its funding. A local conservation group, the Committee for Idaho's High Desert, then stepped in to underwrite the \$100 cost of the program, but this time a group of ranchers threatened to cancel their memberships to KAID. With the environmental group's financial support, the station withstood the threat and aired the program. However, "The New Range Wars" is just one of many programs vulnerable to censorship. A program on endangered species, broadcast

statewide in early October, found no underwriters. KAID's underwriting account executive, Gayle Valentine, says she had a tough time securing financial backing for the program because "corporations are fearful of being associated with a controversial issue." The Committee for Idaho's High Desert stepped in once again and donated the \$500 needed to air the program. To ensure financial support for controversial public TV broadcasts, the committee has created an underwriting fund. Although the environmental group has already raised about half of the \$600 it cost to underwrite the two documentaries, it hopes to establish a financial base to fund future broadcasts. For more information, write Luann Lee, Treasurer, CIHD, P.O. Box 2863, Boise, ID 83701.



Grace Herndon

## TROUBLED FORESTS

Logging companies are destroying what is left of the West's great forests, charges longtime Colorado resident and journalist Grace Herndon in her book, *Cut and Run: Saying Goodbye to the Last Great Forests in the West*. From Arizona to Washington, U.S. Forest Service employees are being bullied by timber interests into sponsoring sales that compromise forest watersheds, wildlife and irreplaceable habitat, she says. Professing to be neither a "card-carrying eco-terrorist" nor an "emotional tree-hugger," Herndon says: "I've written this book as a citizen's guide to the political thickets surrounding federal forest management and to the possibilities of reforming a failing system." *Cut and Run* contains a state-by-state analysis of Western timber issues and is a useful primer for anyone concerned about the West's troubled forests.

Western Eye Press, P.O. Box 917, Telluride, CO 81435. Paperback: \$9.95. 235 pages.

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**NATIONAL AUDUBON** will host two winter programs Jan. 4-12 in Yellowstone National Park, and Feb. 15-22 in the northwoods of Minnesota. Experienced staff offer information on natural history and conservation issues as you explore these spectacular scenic areas. The focus in Yellowstone is on general winter ecology, endangered species, and geothermal features. Winter predators: eagles, wolves and owls are featured in northern Minnesota. The opportunity to fly over a wolf pack under study, with experts from the International Wolf Foundation, is a highlight of the workshop. For information contact: National Audubon, 613 Riversville Rd., Box H, Greenwich, CT 06831 (203/869-5272).

**THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE** of your dreams needs a housesitter for the month of February. This is an inexpensive way to have a cross-country ski vacation surrounded by Colorado's highest peaks and Utah's wildest canyons. Hovenweep National Monument is across the road. For beautiful solitude, archaeology and birding, call 303/565-8398. (1x23p)

**FOR THE SAKE OF THE CREEK ...** new book — 20 years of conservation efforts in Montana's blue ribbon fishing drainage, Rock Creek. Interesting to individuals/classes studying river protection, this review lays out players, preservation techniques and continuing problems in one drainage. Good reading. \$6.00. RCAC, 131 S. Higgins #205, Missoula, MT 59802 (406/728-2841). (1x23p)

**POSITION AVAILABLE:** Greater Ecosystem Alliance of Bellingham, Washington, seeks a qualified conservation biologist with passion for wilderness and experience in grass-roots advocacy, to educate and work with activists and agencies to delineate greater ecosystem boundaries, identify threats to biodiversity and generate reserve proposals in the Monashee, Selkirk and Central Cascades areas of Washington and British Columbia. MS required. Expertise in landscape ecology and GIS preferred. \$20,000 plus benefits. To begin in February 1992. Send resumé and references by Dec. 31 to Mitch Friedman, GEA, PO Box 2813, Bellingham, WA 98227; 206/671-9950.

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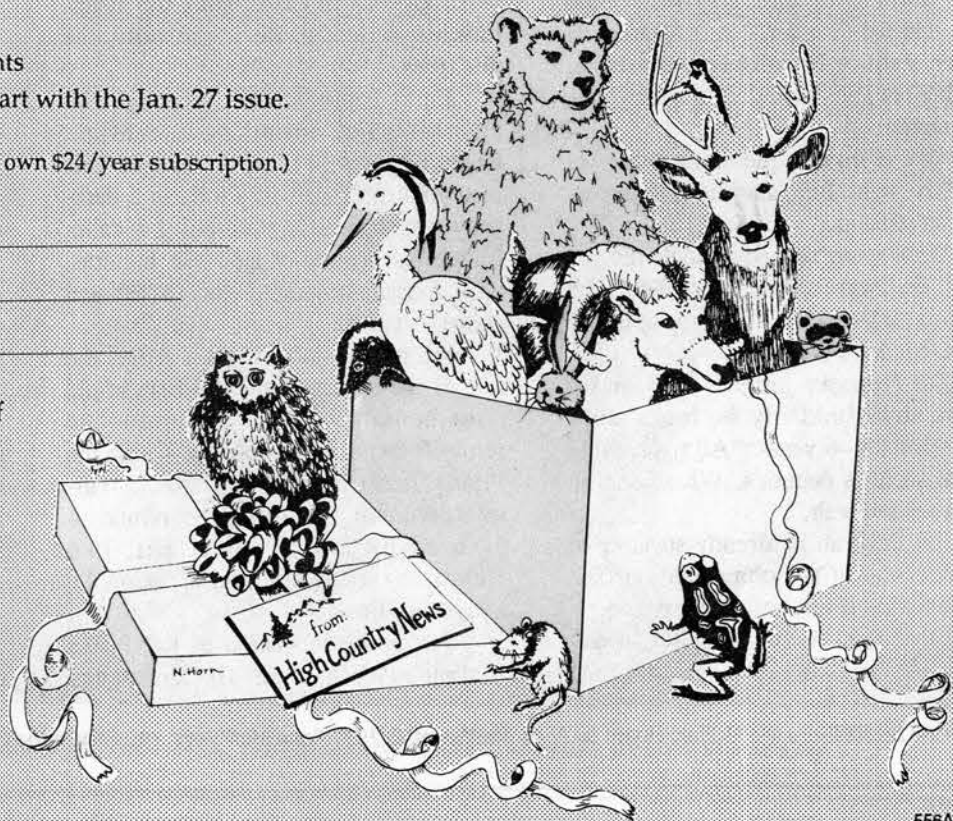
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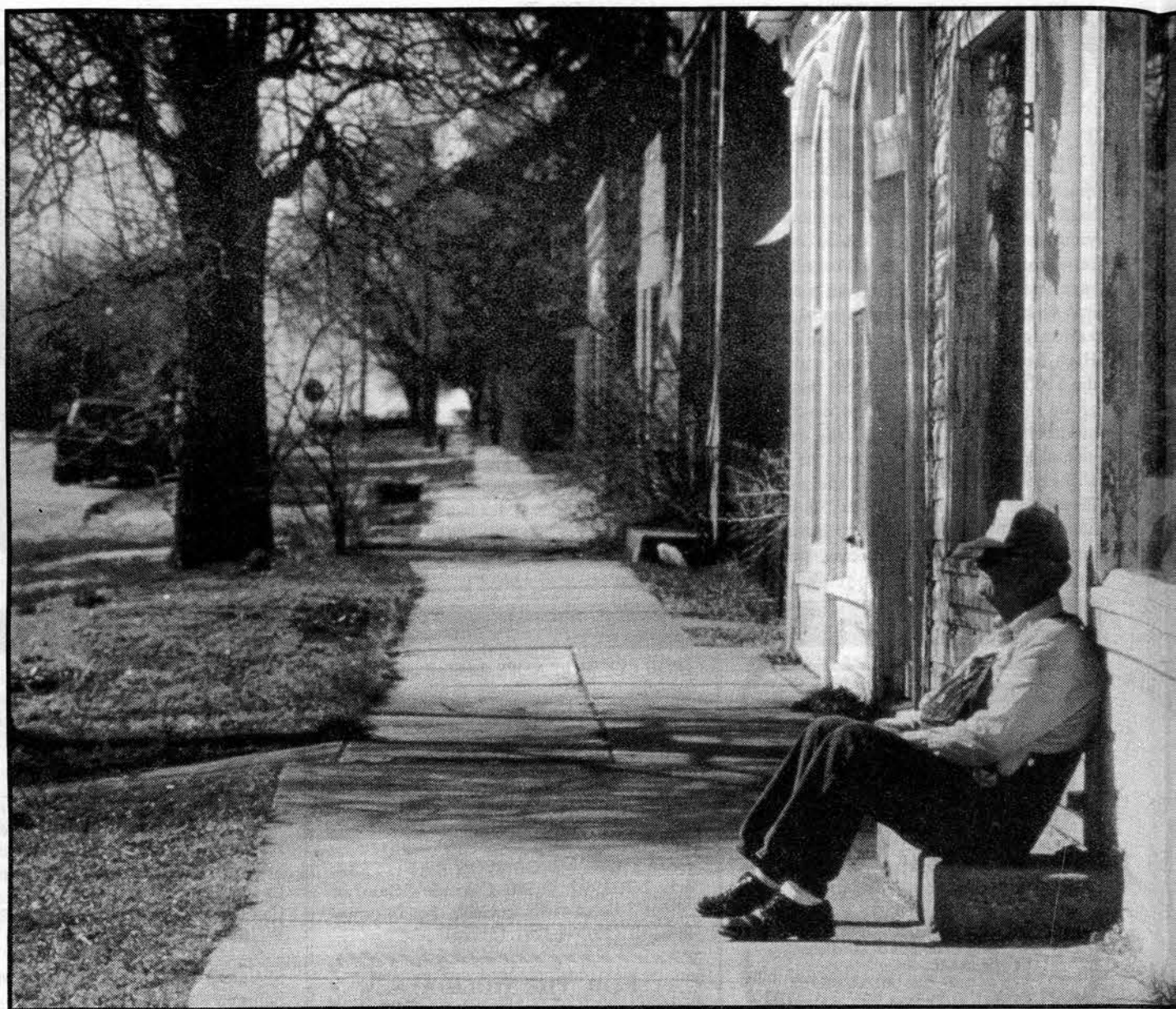


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Great Plains towns have lost population and fallen into disrepair

## An academic couple brings an un- message to the people of the Great Plains

—by Anne Matthews

**F**rank Popper is on the phone, leaning perilously back in his aged swivel chair and looking out the window. He is talking with Cloyd Clark, the Nebraska judge who will host part of an upcoming visit to the Plains.

Frank and Deborah Popper are scheduled for a public lecture and forum in McCook, Neb., near the Kansas border. Then a research expedition into backcountry Nebraska and Colorado. Then on to Denver, to debate the Buffalo Commons concept at the annual national convention of American planners.

"Sure, sure, sure," Frank Popper says into the receiver. He is a rat-tat-tat talker, gulping breaths between ideas, waving his arms to indicate the cresting of a notion.

"We'll answer questions, whatever you like, right, fine, stay as long as people can stand us.

"How many security people did you say?" He listens again. "Yes. Well. That sounds extreme. I know people are upset, but don't you think—"

The Nebraska judge's reply makes Frank sigh. Suddenly he looks much older than his 46 years. "All right, half a dozen sheriff's deputies. Whatever. Just don't tell Deborah."

But Deborah is already standing in the doorway of the chairman's office, her shoulders tense, her face resigned.

I look from one to the other, several times, but they still resemble a mild and

conscientious academic couple. They do not seem the sort of people whose research presentations require armed bodyguards.

### In Nebraska, 400 turn out

The Poppers' presentation packs the McCook high school auditorium with nearly 400 people, an impressive turnout for a warm Saturday night at the end of calving season.

Attendees from four states — Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota — fill the velveteen tip-up chairs. There are lots of ties in evidence, lots of pearl necklaces. A bouquet of prairie grasses and a buffalo robe adorn the stage.

Judge Cloyd Clark stalks the aisles, looking delighted. He is the only one that does.

Frank Popper's talk is received with absolute and unsmiling attention. Expecting a wild man, the crowd gets instead a sober Harvard Ph.D. in a dark-gray pin-stripe suit, delivering a calm, formal accounting of land-use patterns, with special attention to where myth and statistics collide.

He tells them their own story, the tale of the forgotten semiarid fifth of the continental U.S. No one state, he reminds them, lies completely within the Plains; consider the difficulties — cultural, political, educational, economic — created by having, in effect, two Nebraskas, lying east and west of the anhydrous line.

The entire population of the Plains is about that of Georgia. The largest city

actually on the Plains is Lubbock, Texas, (pop. 173,000) and the second-largest Billings, Mont. (67,000).

It is an unusual region, he continues, with a history of excess and scarcity. Boom leads to overplanting and overgrazing which lead to bust which leads to depopulation.

Already the Plains have been through three such cycles, and are starting on a fourth.

The first cycle runs from the Homestead Act of 1862 through the cattle drives and die-ups of the 1880s and the financial panic and drought of the 1890s. The early 1900s bring new homesteading laws, but from 1920 on, a recurrence of drought and locusts puts the Plains into depression well before 1929. The 1930s see the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl, with Okies a new symbol of Plains depopulation.

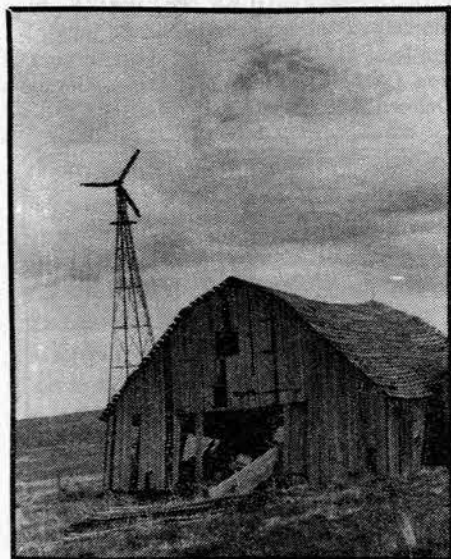
In the mid-20th century, Frank continues, conditions look briefly better. The Plains are poor but economically viable, mostly due to heavy injections of federal subsidies.

Throughout the 1970s, there is energetic sodbusting, 10,000 acres at a time. Gas and oil boomtowns dot the Northern Plains.

But the 1980s puncture it all, revealing the fragility of extractive (and quite possibly finite) economies. Now, ghost towns are forming everywhere on the Plains, as the little settlements that once sustained the region lose doctor, bus stop, air service, clergy, young people.

But this time around, Frank argues, almost pleading with them now, this time the cycle of decline is different, and worse.

Now, ghost towns are forming everywhere on the Plains



Mike McClure

From the book *Where the Buffalo Roam* by Anne Matthews, © 1991 Anne Matthews, reprinted with permission of the publisher, Grove Press Inc.





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# an unwelcome e Great Plains

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But the real problem is slow-leak depopulation. Some places will get by on the 21st-century Plains; service centers like McCook, also those in the shadow of urban areas, or near interstates, or where traditional mining or agriculture economies stay viable.

But many others will not make it.

**D**eborah, at the overhead projector, slides onto the auditorium screen a map of Plains counties in significant land-use distress, the same map I saw in the computer lab at Rutgers.

There are audible gasps, then a rising hum of defiance and dread. Many heads in the audience suddenly bow, or are proudly raised. Couples feel for each others' hands.

At the next display — Nebraska counties in land-use distress — there are audible murmurs of "Oh, my God," as people half rise out of their seats in the semi-darkness to spot their home areas.

"Like waiting for SAT scores," whispers a high school boy in the row behind me.

"I ain't selling," calls a rancher, from the rear of the room. Another rancher bounces on booted toes, too agitated to sit.

"Holy cow," he says, "holy cow." For a Nebraska Lutheran, this is very strong language. "These folks really hate us. This is grim. We're really getting beat on."

Frank is talking again. So what shall we do?

One solution is a Buffalo Commons.

The 110 distressed counties just shown would be the nucleus. Much of the land in such areas is no longer even under cultivation. And many other potential building blocks are already in place — thousands of properties foreclosed by the Farmers' Home Administration and the Farm Credit System and private banks; lands in the Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers not to cultivate marginal land; holdings of the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management; acreage held in trust by

Other contributing factors have appeared: the greenhouse effect, shifts in foreign policy which mean missile-base closings across the Plains, shifts in world agriculture markets, even the change in American diets away from red meat. Certainly the Plains have a historic mission as the granary of last resort, for the

environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy; state parks and preserves; and the 19 national grasslands already managed by the Forest Service.

On most of the Plains, life would go on as it always has. In these other parts, the buffalo would indeed roam — and Japanese and German and French and U.S. tour buses, too.

### The four responses

The Poppers sit down in the auditorium's front row as local panelists rise to reply: Sue Renken, a banker from Enders; Ervain Friehe, a wheat grower near McCook; Jack Maddux, a Wauneta rancher and candidate for lieutenant governor; Jane Renner Hood, the executive director of the Nebraska Humanities Council. Each rebuttal is punctuated with angry cheers.

Everywhere they speak the Poppers encounter a pattern of outrage which they have come to call the Four Responses: Pioneer Gumption (Don't underestimate determination and hard work), Dollar Potential (Plains food production can still feed the world), Eastern Ignorance (self-explanatory) and Prairie Zen (our landscape is a powerful source of spiritual renewal).

All are in operation now. The banker, peppy and blonde, describes her afternoon rides with the family cattle herds. After hardworking hours in the saddle, she says, she always feels overwhelmingly peaceful and happy. Shouts of agreement drown her next sentences. Over the tumult, she cries, "I love our Plains!"

The political candidate makes New Jersey jokes, and reminds the audience of Nebraska's innovative legislation, most restrictive in the nation, to keep family farms from takeover by agribusiness land cartels.

The historian passionately quotes the 19th-century Sioux mystic, Black Elk, on the enduring glory of the Great Plains — "the beautiful land of our fathers, forever green and clear." As she finishes, the crowd explodes with righteous hurrahs and applause.

The Poppers exchange glances.

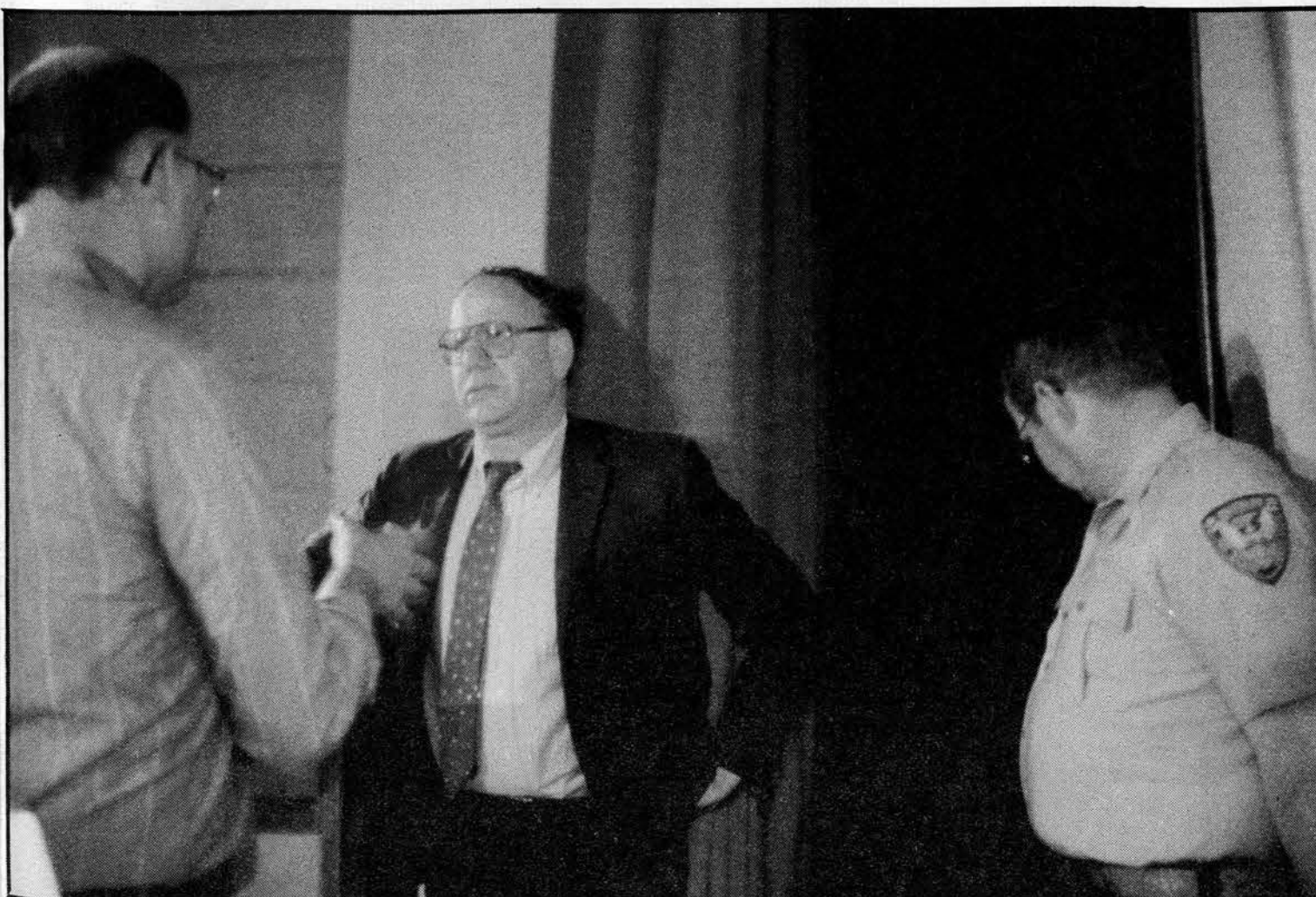
"Everyone loves to cite Black Elk out here," Frank whispers to me. "I can't

*Continued on next page*



Phil Stern

## The real problem is slow-leak depopulation



© Jeffrey Aaronson

Frank Popper is confronted outside the McCook, Nebraska, public forum while a sheriff's deputy stands by



Dale Schicketanz

'There are only three things worth fighting for — life, liberty and land!'

— Paul D. Ornan, Nebraska farmer

## A message for the Great Plains ...

Continued from previous page

imagine why. His memoirs are probably in large part a work of semi-fiction by some overreaching white anthropologist type back in the '30s. Why cling to a text that foretells the vanishing of the white way, and the return of the buffalo? It's completely nonadaptive. These farmers and ranchers don't want to know it yet, but in the contemporary West they are the new Indians. We seem to be cast as the new Crazy Horse, speaking in visions. What a mindwarp!" He heaves himself up to take questions from the house.

A farmer wants to know why the Commons proposal ignores the states. An insurance agent from North Platte accuses the Poppers of betraying the principle of the land-grant university.

Frank tries to explain that academic planners think a great deal about states — states as self-regulating entities, personifying the home-rule concept of "every tub on its own bottom"; and also states as the beneficiaries of research done at their perennially undersupported land-grant colleges, the boundaries of the public university in most cases truly being the boundaries of the states.

But what good is a land-grant school, in the long run, if uncomfortable discoveries are hidden from the taxpayers who pay professional salaries?

"Nice answers, stop there," Deborah mutters beside me, but her husband is just warming up. In fact, he says, starting to stride back and forth behind the lectern, states are quite artificial constructs, and not always useful ones. Colorado — half prairie, half mountains — is a *terrible* idea.

All the Plains states are terrible ideas, ecologically speaking. This line of argument does not go over well.

"I feel I'm failing as a communicator," Frank whispers, as the evening's moderator, the marketing manager of the Decatur County Feed Yard (Oberlin, Kansas), begins to wrap up.

Deborah shrugs. "So don't give them an A in the course."

The peer reviews, at least, are favorable. "They do pretty effective teaching," comments Charlie Gregory, an instructor at McCook Community College, as he watches the crowd hand in comment sheets at the close of the presentation and walk out stonyfaced, like people leaving a wake.

"This part of the country responds to unemotional fact, not Donahue, and that's what they got. Before tonight, about 75 percent were dead set against

the Poppers. Now, it's probably 35 percent."

### Good facts, wrong conclusion

The completed questionnaires suggest some private doubts behind the public rhetoric of denial. From a resident of Hermosa, S.D. (pop. 251): "Terrifyingly logical."

Three from McCook:

"Stupid."

"Good facts, wrong conclusions."

"Better pray for rain — or all move to New Jersey."

Four from western Kansas:

"Maybe a hundred years ago this would make sense, now, no."

"I think we should be listening, very carefully, and live within our limits."

"I believe they documented their thesis."

"We all see the decline, but refuse to acknowledge it."

From Danbury, Neb. (pop. 143):

"I suspect they're right, if only by accident."

Others in the audience are less easy to convince.

"There are only three things worth fighting for — life, liberty and land!" cries Paul D. Ornan, a 45-year-old farmer from Maywood, Neb., climbing over a row of seats to back a sweating Frank Popper step by step across the stage.

Frank is 5'10", but Ornan's face looms four furious inches above his. Half a dozen uniformed sheriff's deputies, hands on holsters, move toward professor and challenger. Ornan is shouting, and many in the departing crowd turn to stare, some shocked, some grinning.

"Don't try to come in and use our land for common property for people from New Jersey and California. *Don't you do that!*"

Frank opens his mouth, then closes it again; Ornan is trembling with anger, and far from done. "If they want my land," he announces, enunciating with extreme care, hands convulsively opening and shutting, "they'll have to shoot me and drag me away!"

"Hmm, well, interesting point," says Frank in his best department chair's voice, trying to calm the farmer, but Ornan will not be soothed; he is ushered into the Nebraska twilight still muttering about East Coast conspiracies. "When you're threatened, you have to respond," he explains to his escort, loudly, on the way up the aisle to the exit.

"Dear, I thought you were dead

meat there," says Deborah, trying to maintain her poise.

Frank Skinner, an officer with the McCook sheriff's department, apologizes, and so do a half-dozen other people standing by. A few minutes later, Skinner stands on the high school lawn, watching Frank and Deborah (both still a little subdued) walking toward Cloyd Clark's car under the cottonwoods that shadow the tidy residential street, each house with a porch light, each porch with a welcome mat.

### It breaks your heart

"The Poppers are right," Frank Skinner says softly. In the warm twilight, his thin, kind face is sad and knowing. "With closed minds, we'll get nowhere. A lot of the land is going, and it just breaks your heart."

Wherever the Poppers speak on the Plains, the region's Darwinian history springs to disturbing life. In a Rutgers seminar room, the Buffalo Commons can remain a controlled intellectual exercise.

But the postmodern Plains strongly suspect they are perceived by the rest of America as a lesser land — interchangeable rectangular dung-colored states — and resentments build and build.

With some reason: When a 1990 Rand McNally travel atlas, for reasons of space, omitted North Dakota, South Dakota and Oklahoma, the editor explained blithely that Plains states seemed least likely to be missed.

In these wars of place, Plains animosity is directed almost wholly north-eastward. The Eastern Seaboard is ritually scorned on the Plains, at all social and income levels, as a land of yammerers who have never seen a prime-time pig-feed commercial, or heard a tornado warning siren.

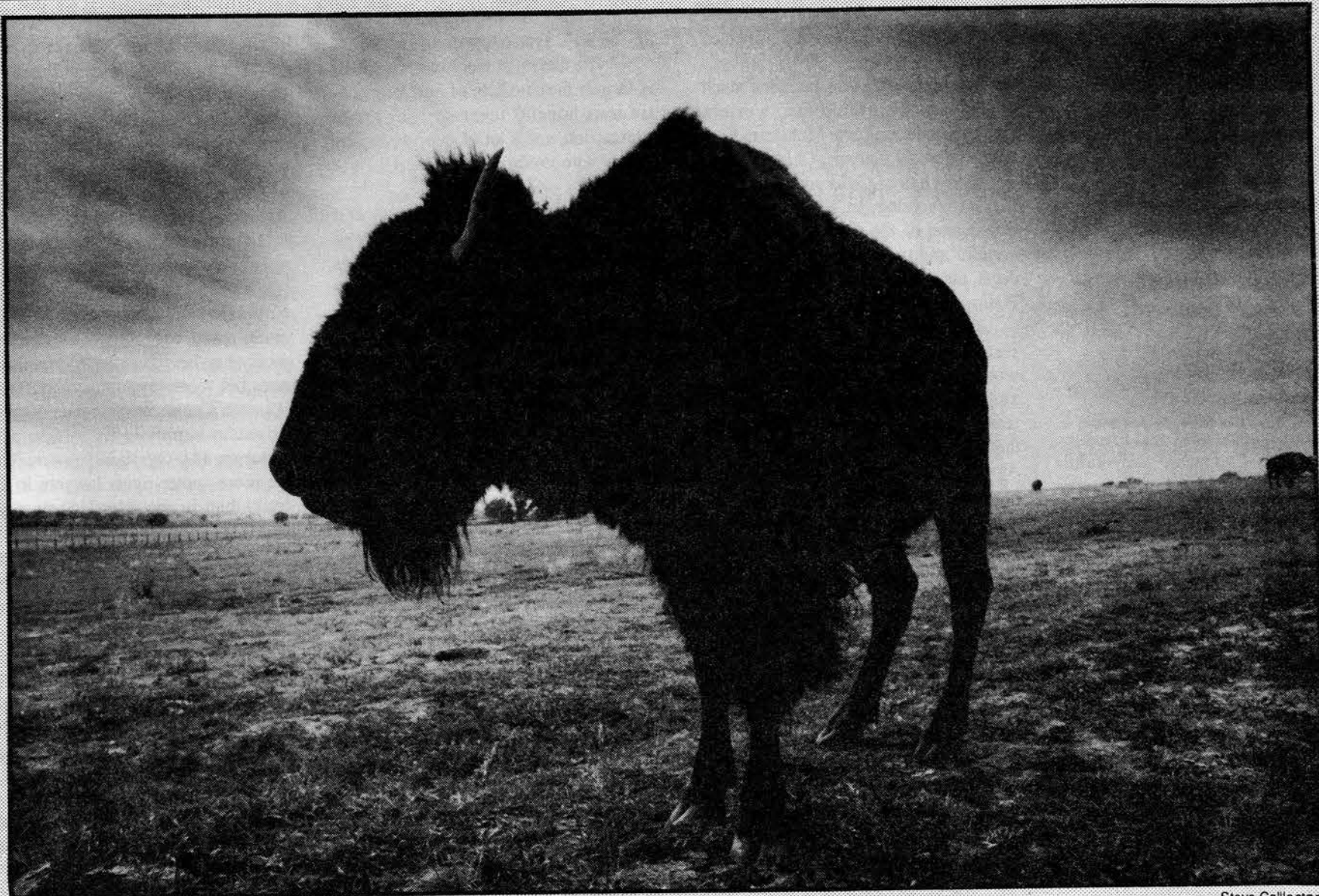
California, by contrast, has long carried a covert fascination, because hundreds of thousands of Plains residents desperate for agricultural or defense jobs fled there in the 1930s and 1940s. Very few returned. (For years in Pierre, rumors persisted about a wondrous Los Angeles event called South Dakota Day, a Valhalla reunion by the Pacific where state expatriates turned up in splendid cars and congratulated one another on getting the hell out of Murdo.)

Faulkner's observation that the past isn't dead, it isn't even past, is confirmed by every crowd the Poppers address. Great Plains people, exalted and trapped

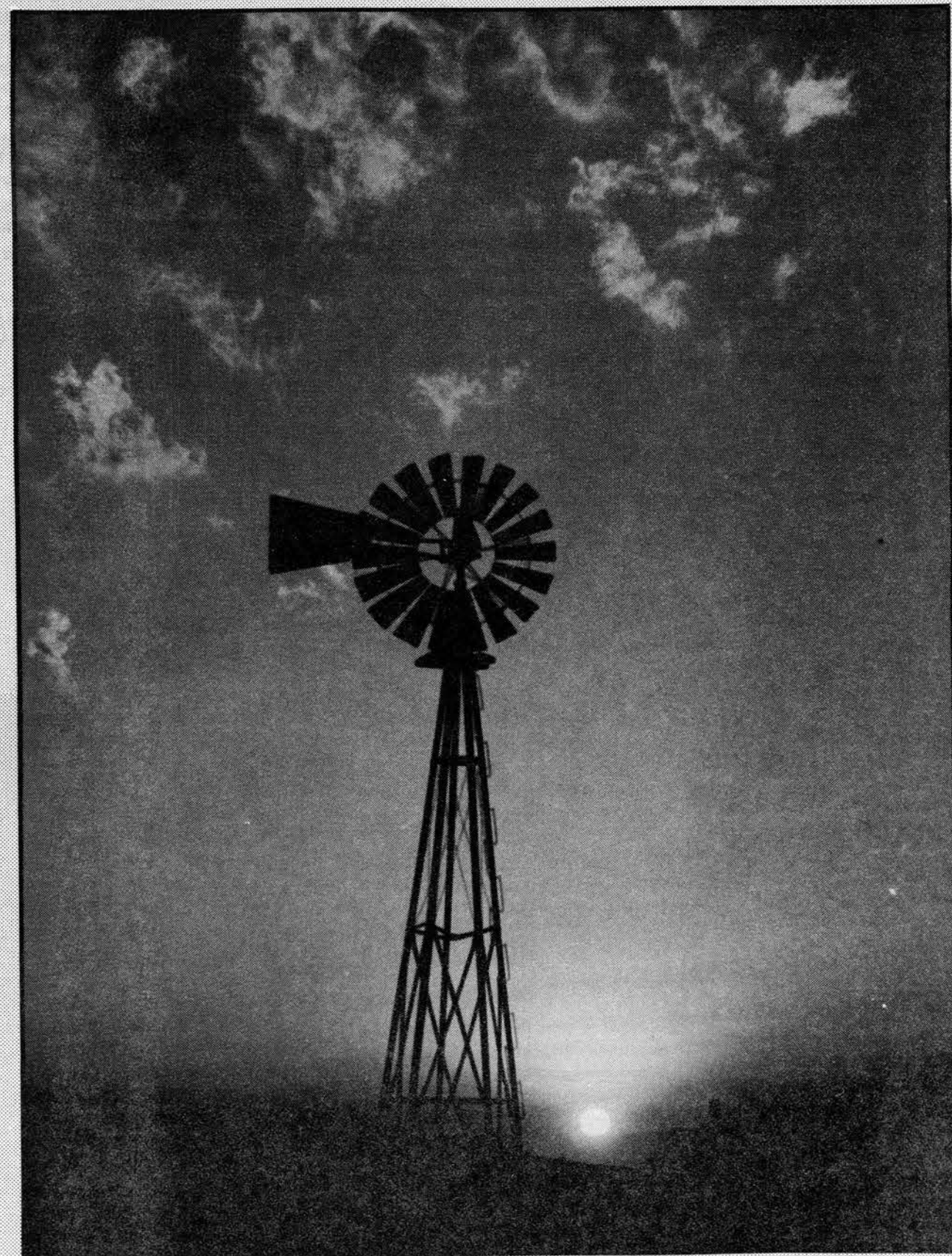
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Frank and Deborah Popper in front of a map showing depleted lands in the Great Plains states  
Rutgers University



Steve Collector



Richard Madson

The Plains are most interesting when studied in an unfolding sequence, commons style. You graze, and you move on. The allure is in the passing through. It is country built for motion, country where motion equals hope. "They've got the dwindles," people whisper on the Plains, if a friend or relation takes to sitting and staring for no good reason.

In a region whose unofficial motto is "Keep Moving or Die," it is not a diagnosis lightly pronounced. The early settlers, between chores, did a lot of sitting and staring.

In the 1940s, a Nebraska social historian named Everett Dick collected hundreds of accounts of prairie life that chronicle how deeply the physical geography of the Plains — northern, central and southern — affected the women who went there. Homesteaders' wives raised in the green East with carpets underfoot and gaslight overhead, clean sheets on the bed and hot-house lettuce on the table, often adjusted with extreme difficulty, or not at all.

"There was nothing to see and nothing to do," Dick notes, summarizing the testimony of early journals, letters and memoirs. "The conversation each day was a repetition of the day before, and always concerned the terrible place where they had to live.

"Even the children felt the monotony of the life. One day in the '80s a little boy came into the sod house to his mother and, throwing himself on the floor in hopeless grief, exclaimed, 'Mamma, will we always have to live here?' When she hopelessly replied in the affirmative, he cried out in desperation, 'And will we have to die here, too?'"

Well, yes. The cowboy dirge, "O bury me not on the lone prairie," reflects accurately the last wishes of many. New Englanders were notorious in early Plains society for frantic deathbed pleas to have their bodies shipped back East, wanting only to be buried as they had not lived, near water and trees.

— Anne Mathews

## The Buffalo Commons idea came to the Poppers in the spring of 1987.

On the way home from a geographer's conference, stuck in 12-lane traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike, they began to argue ("to discuss," amends Deborah) the many insoluble and paradoxes, historical, social and ecological, of the Great Plains.

"Oh, just turn it back to the buffalo, let *them* have it!" said Deborah finally, exasperated.

"A buffalo homeland," said Frank.

"A Buffalo Commons," they said together, as traffic slowed to a crawl near where the Jersey meadowlands disappear completely under asphalt, close to the Verrazano Bridge exit for Staten Island and the urban badlands of the Bayway Refinery.

The Poppers' choice of the term "commons" to describe a possible future for the Great Plains stems from renewed international interest, among economists, governments and land-use planners, in the cooperative management of natural resources as a way to reconcile or avert clashes between public and private interests over issues like Costa Rican rainforest harvesting or Bangladeshi fishing-ground preservation. Settling the American prairies, land specialists like the Poppers often argue, was a classic example of commons tragedy — well-intentioned private incentive eventually leading to disastrous public consequences.

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Over the next 40 years, the Poppers argue, depressed and underpopulated portions of 10 Plains states should become a massive ecological reserve, incorporating, they estimate, about 139,000 square miles of open land and wildlife refuge.

On a wall map of current federal lands, Frank points out the projected areas.

The affected zone includes much of the western Dakotas, western Nebraska and eastern Montana; sizeable portions of Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas; and bits of Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming. In all, 110 counties, or a quarter of the Great Plains, which contain about 413,000 current residents, out of 6.5 million people on the Plains.

The Poppers call their vision the Buffalo Commons. Set in place, it would be the world's largest natural and historic preservation project, a massive act of ecological restoration that boldly reverses three centuries of American settlement and land-use history. Visitors to such a Commons would see the heart of the continent as Lewis and Clark first knew it, hundreds of miles of windswept grass and migrant game.

For Indians and for the early cattlemen, the entire Plains were originally a commons. Animals and people constantly migrated across it, to graze and camp and then move on, allowing a dry and fragile biosystem to renew itself. The 19th century's determination to conquer and transform the Plains put the native prairies to the plow, grew towns overnight where buffalo wallows used to be, launched a thousand Hollywood oaters, and set in motion an intensely extractive economy.

The research of Frank and Deborah Popper suggests that the epic struggle to tame the Plains, and to mine it of topsoil and oil and gas and water, has also been the largest, longest-running environmental miscalculation in the nation's history.

In its place, the Poppers offer a flurry of what-ifs. What if a younger America had accepted that the Plains are not arable country, at least not as understood in the green lands east of the 98th meridian?

What if we had not tried to force the arid soil of Oklahoma to behave like Ohio's rich earth, grimly resorting to pesticides and herbicides, sodbusting and rip-up harvesting? The classic Plains boom-and-bust cycle of drought, financial woe and depopulation is

rolling again; what if this time it goes all the way? Frank Popper sighs.

"The history of the American West is largely the chronicle of one long continuous hopeful feverish real-estate transaction, and a lot of people, mostly those who could least afford it, got burned."

But the Plains, splendid and sparsely settled, may hold a number of other possibilities. Imagining them is the land-use specialist's craft. Describing the conditions that create them is the geographer's art. Frank Popper leans back in his swivel chair, stretches pleasurably, then runs over some of the alternatives.

The Plains are the bulk of the Louisiana Purchase. Was the region intended from the first as a land reserve, a national nest egg? Thomas Jefferson seems to have acquired the plains in precisely this spirit, believing that, though his contemporaries might not know what to do with such lands, their descendants likely would.

Or are the Plains a real-estate white elephant of unprecedented scale despite a century and a half of public and private investment? Wells dry, mortgages unmet, might it drop into the taxpayer's lap in another generation, the S&L of American land use? Conventional economic reckonings go haywire at the 98th meridian.

No one, on the Plains or off, bureaucrat or academic, developer or environmentalist, holds exactly the same vision of the region's future or its fiscal health. Charges and countercharges have piled up for decades, like tumbleweeds against a barbed-wire fence.

Some facts no one disputes. The Plains are rural, but they are no longer overwhelmingly agricultural.

On the Northern Plains, drought and population loss are emptying Montana's flat eastern three-quarters.

North Dakota is a state in trouble, its farmland dropped 40 percent in value in 20 years, its population less now than in 1930.

In North Dakota in the 1980s, three of four new jobs were non-farm, and more yet were outside the state's Plains portions. In the same decade, North Dakota's population fell by 10 percent

again, a loss concentrated in the western or Plains section of the state.

South Dakota must contend with population leakage, too, plus racial tensions. The Great Plains have the most homogenous overall population of any American region — 95 percent white — but South Dakota's 80,000 Native Americans remain a largely unassimilated presence, 100 years after the tragedy at Wounded Knee.

The Central Plains (western Nebraska, western Kansas and Colorado's dry eastern expanses) present somewhat less daunting economic pictures but worry even more about water. Western Kansas has less than 50 years' irrigation supply in its portion of the underground Ogallala aquifer. There are more water-rights lawyers in Colorado than in any other U.S. state. And on the Southern Plains, Oklahoma and Texas both face sobering aquifer problems and population loss, as their mixed economies of minerals-extraction and agriculture boom and falter.

If the backcountry and small-town Plains are emptying out, and the great natural aquifers and elegantly engineered reservoirs are drying up, does this mean the American frontier is somehow re-emerging?

The Census Bureau declared the American frontier closed in 1890, when few large areas of blank space remained on maps of the nation to indicate unsettled land. Now, the Poppers suggest, the blank spaces seem to be returning, even expanding. What should we do about it? What did the Plains look like, anyway, before 1890, before 1870, before 1850, before white settlement? What if we were to try for the America that might have been?

"We are pursuing *scholarship*, not advocacy," says Deborah Popper firmly. Fine-boned and dark-haired, she is sitting across the sunny office, listening to her husband brood, labeling a pile of computer disks.

"Think of the Buffalo Commons as a metaphor, if you like. Frank and I are not knee-jerk environmentalists. We don't want to lie on the weeds. We just want to get people talking about the future of a region."

— Anne Matthews



Greg Kearney

# Couple brings a message ...

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by their curious history, are belligerently loyal to ancestral suffering, resentful of, yet dependent on, outside assistance, profoundly suspicious of fancy language, change and choice.

"Down-to-earth" and "practical" are compliments. Actions are what count as revealers of truth. "Talks too much" is profound condemnation, about the worst you can say of anyone.

The next-worst adjective for a person or an idea is "different," as in "That's real ... different."

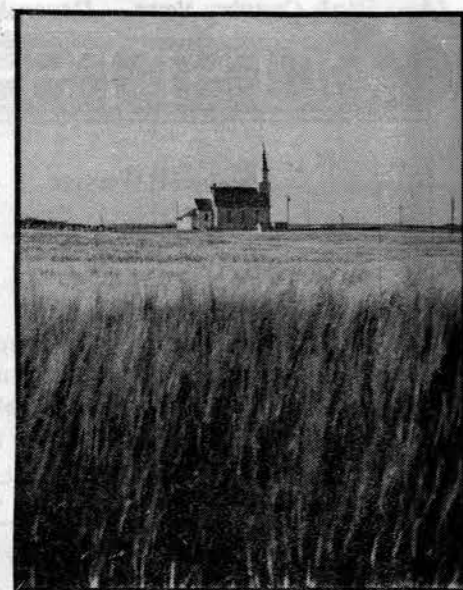
For a hundred years, the Plains through brutal necessity have recognized only two sorts of people: those who leave and those who stay.

Though I grew up in Wisconsin, and live in New Jersey, I am marginally respectable in McCook because my great-great-grandfather Andersson sat out the Long Winter of 1881 in a South Dakota claim shanty, because my grandmother McDonnell was born to a pioneer family near Hartington, Nebraska, in 1900, and never saw an ocean till she was 70. The Poppers are ... real different.

Worse, they talk for a living; talk for pleasure; talk to help.

One of the principal cultural barriers in Frank and Deborah's self-imposed mission to educate a region is the Ivy League/research university policy-analysis style itself, whose cool and rigorous language traditionally permits no excuses, leaves nowhere to hide.

Its impersonal realism in laying out options and predicting outcomes can sound, to the uninitiated ear, like cruelty. Institute A, mandate B, and interesting results will occur, observe the decisive variables, suggest a course of action, ah, yes, a whole region down the drain, remarkable scholarship, next case.



Richard Madson

## Nothing warned the Poppers of the Plains' terror of talk, and change, and talking about change

### Mutual incomprehension

Nothing in their professional or personal histories warned the Poppers of the Plains' unreasoning terror of talk, and change, and talking about change. "In vain" is the hardest Popper message of all. At the buffet supper after the McCook talk, a Colorado feedlot owner corners Frank.

"Asking us to admit that we were wrong all along, in trying to settle a lot

of this country, is like asking us to have surgery without anaesthetic." Better preventive medicine now, Frank retorts, than wholesale disaster later.

They stare at each other over the three-pepper coleslaw and kiwi salad, in mutual incomprehension and despair. ■

Anne Matthews' book, *Where the Buffalo Roam*, will be published in April by Grove Press Inc.

Diane Sylvain

The crucible of television can bring odd results, especially with academics, who are notoriously poor interview subjects, just sophisticated enough to be nervous about talking into a lens, but loath to give up the lecturer's style for the intimate, underplayed voice that works on tape.

And glamour is not the Poppers' strong suit — Frank looks like a friendly butcher, and Deborah's only cosmetics are soap and water. As we drive past wheat and peanut fields, heading for the Wichita Mountain buffalo preserve, NBC producer Sam Hurst is trying to decide how hard his morning will be.

"We're desperately attempting to describe to Plains people how much smaller their world is becoming," Frank says. The built-in paradoxes of the contemporary West quickly turn

his language compressed and allusive. "A fax-and-FedEx frontier may lie ahead, or perhaps one that features primarily wolves, Wal-Marts and nuclear waste dumps, or some combination of both. The region is at a choice point."

Deborah has been doing the *New York Times* crossword, rapidly, and in ink. Now she looks up.

"Remember, we have support from a broad spectrum of interests, all of whom dislike each other," she tells Hurst. "The buffalo rancher hates the cattle rancher, who hates the oilman, whose blood boils at subsidized farmers, who scorn the Bay Area environmentalist, who loves the romance of buffalo but would never order a buffalo steak except in a very trendy restaurant."

Hurst is startled by her sang-froid. "You're deliberately encouraging vying value systems, then, despite the hatreds already there?"

"The West is a big place," Deborah replies. "We're all having to deal with a national deconstruction of our excesses. Wilderness areas in national parks are already graded by sanitation and supplies. The Commons is really one giant conservation easement. But not a uniform one. In some units of the Commons, pat-a-buffalo, definitely. Elsewhere ... Frank, remember the Iowa doctor who wrote?"

"The rite-of-passage guy!" Frank exclaims. "He wants to propose a new

ritual of American manhood once the Commons gets going: the 14-year-old male's buffalo hunt. With flint-tipped spears for preference, early Lakota style. Of course, that means you lose a few adolescents every year, like Masai being eaten by lions."

Hurst considers possible sound bites. "Living lightly on the land, then; nature calls the shots; a shift in national land ethic?"

Frank nods. "Land no one wanted in the first place. Patty Limerick says there has never been a John Muir of grass. These lost sections of America badly need that. We, in our hubris, volunteered."

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Our caravan splits up. The television people, as always, are on deadline, and need the next plane out from Oklahoma City, if they can find their way back across the prairies.

But Frank, Deborah, Neil Salisbury and I are heading deeper into Buffalo Commons country. We wave goodbye and then swing west out of

Gotebo, Okla., passing picked-over cotton fields and distant columns of oil rigs strung with lights. Behind me, in the darkened back seat of Neil's van, I hear Deborah grumbling.

"Couldn't I have read them just one footnote? A little one? Not an ounce of documentation all day is a terrible thing."

Frank sprawls, arms outflung, head draped over the seatback.

"I love television. All my life I've been impersonating academic dullness, never suspecting this other side of my personality. Now I discover that inside Modest Popper — 'Go away, I want only to write' — is also Magisterial Popper — 'The prairie, my friends, is a magnificent biosphere!' — and even Monomaniacal Popper — 'I am the Great Plains!'"

Deborah: "Dear, may I make a suggestion?"

Frank: "Shut up?"

Deborah: "Riiiiight."

Silence.

Then Frank: "But I'm so good at being superficial."

Neil Salisbury and I sneak a simultaneous glance at the back seat, just as Deborah puts her hand gently over Frank's mouth, and he kisses it. They lean against each other, holding hands, not talking. We drive on in the starlit prairie dark.

— Anne Matthews

## GUEST ESSAY

by Donald Worster

The Great Plains may look like a simple problem, but they are not. Despite their seeming monotony, the minimalist vista they present of immutable land meeting changeless sky, they are in fact the most volatile place on the North American continent. Their complexity lies not in forms but in climate. Nowhere else do Americans confront such climatic extremes of cold and hot, or such rapid oscillations around the crucial point that divides wet from dry.

The old song brags about how steady and cheerful is our home on the range "where the skies are not cloudy all day." But we know that the man who wrote that song must have been a little daft. The vision of deer and antelope at play in the fields of eastern Colorado, frolicking over the grasslands of Nebraska, chasing each other happily across the Staked Plains of Texas, leaves out the flies and the scummy waterholes and the hard winters they endured.

The stark truth is that the Plains have, on the whole, been an endless puzzle and a considerable disappointment to those who have settled here. We have never really understood them well, and we have seldom been realistic about their possibilities.

Over the next 100 years the words may get more discouraging than ever, if climatologists are right. Planet Earth is beginning to warm up, and the Plains are going to get more than their share of the warmth. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a blue-ribbon group of scientists assembled by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme, has calculated that the global mean temperature will rise three degrees Centigrade before the end of the 21st century, a greater change than we have seen over the past 10,000 years.

The Great Plains, says the panel, can expect less rainfall during the growing season, less soil moisture and a drier climate.

Such a warming trend stands outside history as we have known it. Nonetheless, we do have considerable experience with drought to draw on — in the 1890s, the 1930s, and so forth. We can learn from that history what people went through in such periods, and we can derive from that experience some insights for the years ahead.

*The first lesson is that it is hard to adapt to a climate that you do not fully understand or do not want to accept.*

This applies to everyone, including the experts. We have a long record of talking about the Plains climate with more confidence than is warranted.

What the people moving West in covered wagons wanted was agricultural opportunity — an abundance of free soil ready for free labor by free men. They needed a climate that would support that dream, and so they chose to talk about the Plains as a garden, actual or potential. If the land was not yet garden-like, they would make it so with plows and enterprise. Rain would follow the plow.

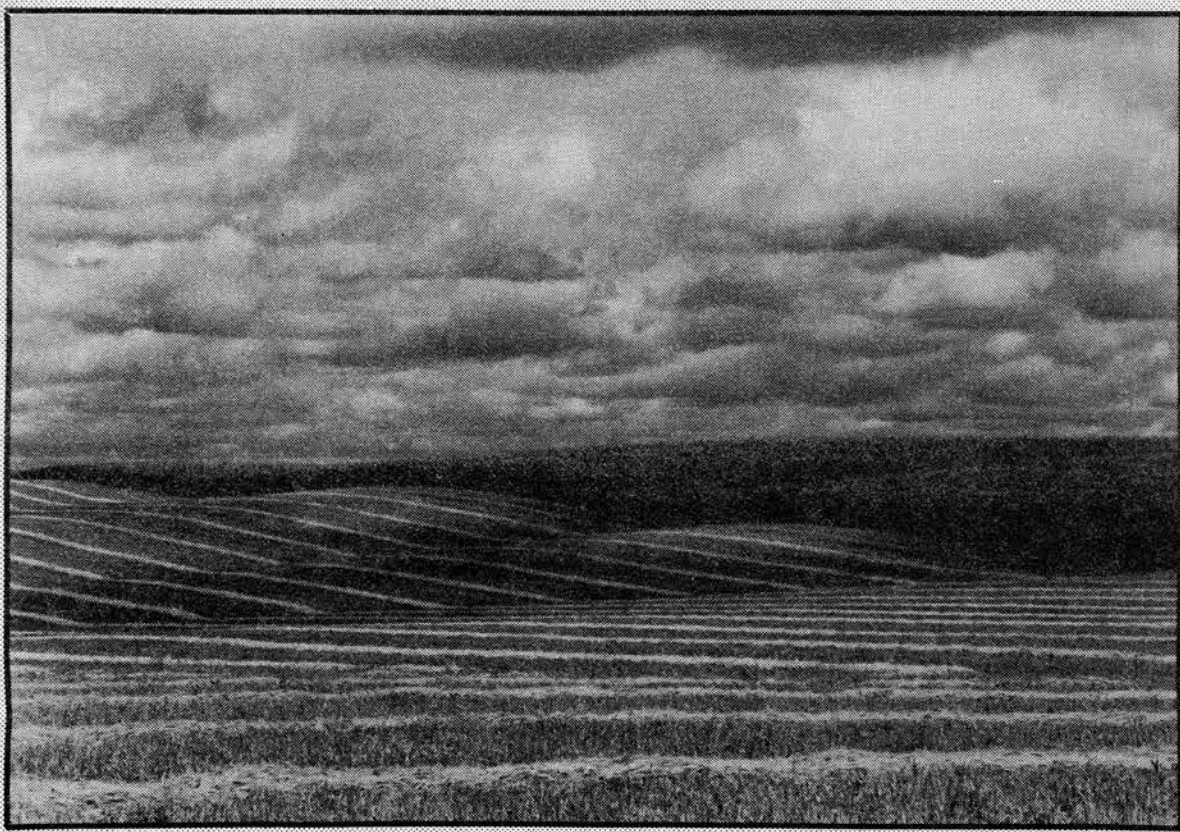
In the subsequent century-plus of white settlement, that folk ideology of environmental improvement has been by far the dominant one on the Plains.

When the dust began to blow in 1932, that consensus image of the Plains as a garden-in-the-making was shaken but not destroyed. Climate suddenly seemed to be more treacherous than many settlers had supposed.

They felt betrayed by providence, by nature, by the government, by railroad companies, by agronomists, by anyone who had encouraged them in their efforts to make the Plains say wheat instead of buffalo grass.

Over the half-century since the dirty 1930s we have talked about and studied the matter of climate endlessly, but we have not yet achieved much understanding of its complexity, despite spending millions on scientific research.

## The answer is grasslands, says this historian of the Plains



Peter Carrels

Our perceptions of climate have always been clouded by ideology, by a will-to-believe on the part of the popular culture and experts alike, and even by a scientific faith in a comprehensible, rational order in the universe.

If, then, 100 years of settler experience and systematic investigation have still not given us any great ability to predict droughts, how can we prepare for the long desiccation that may lie ahead?

We cannot. We cannot expect to make a smooth, easy adaptation to a climate that is a changing, turbulent chaos of cloud, heat and gas.

*A second lesson from the past is that trying to control nature through technology is not an adequate solution for the Plains.*

We cannot rely on mechanical ingenuity to get us through drought or long-term desiccation, nor to establish harmony with the natural world.

The most important document ever published about the region appeared in 1936, *The Future of the Great Plains*, a report of a committee appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt. The report argued that the Plains' ultimate need was to change deep-seated attitudes toward the land as well as to develop new farming practices and engineering that worked with, rather than against, nature.

"It is an inherent characteristic of pioneering settlement to assume that Nature is something of which to take advantage and to exploit; that Nature can be shaped at will to man's convenience," said the report. We now know, it concluded, that "it is our ways, not Nature's, which can be changed."

Since the 1930s, the people of the Plains have consistently ignored that admonition. The conquest of nature through technology is still the dominant way of thinking. As global warming commences, it may continue to condition responses and lead to a foolish investment in one technological panacea after another, wasting time and capital in a vain effort to postpone the ultimate day of climate reckoning.

The most important technology adopted since the

1930s has been deep-well irrigation, particularly of the Ogallala aquifer. The technology encouraged the confidence that water not only can be conserved but also can be invented. By the 1950s, deep-well irrigation contributed more than 20 percent of the region's total annual income.

Over the short run, technology made a more reliable abundance possible. But by the mid 1980s, farmers in Kansas, New Mexico and Texas had to go down 300 feet to find the water table. Many pumps had to shut down. In every state, new government agencies were created to slow the rate of depletion and stretch the supply as far into the future as possible.

A 1982 study by the Kansas Water Office stated that by the year 2020, 75 percent of irrigated acreage in western Kansas will be lost.

Every technological panacea has hidden within its promise the possibilities of catastrophe. Technology offers an easy way out in our troubled relations with nature, but easy ways are usually hard to sustain and more dangerous than we think they will be.

*A third lesson is that the best hope for avoiding another dust bowl catastrophe lies in extensive restoration of the grasslands.*

We have a habit, rooted in our economic institutions, of pushing agricultural development too far, beyond what the environment can bear. We can overcome that habit and lower our demands on this fragile land, returning much of the country to a more natural state.

Altogether the Great Plains contain some 3.5 million square kilometers in Canada and the United States, or 865 million acres. Almost none of that has been permanently put off-limits to crop agriculture. A few parks and wildlife refuges, a series of national grasslands that do not

exceed 1 percent of the total, is all we have designated by law for perpetual protection. The rest is in private hands, and more or less left to the marketplace to determine how it should be used.

Is so much reliance on private self-interest the best way to achieve adaptation to the Plains climate? In each drought, there have been knowledgeable observers who have called for changing that pattern of land-use by changing ownership to some degree, by retiring about a tenth of the whole from crop use and restoring it to something like presettlement condition.

Those observers have recommended repeatedly that those acres ought to be restored as the best guarantee we can find against a future Dust Bowl or drought, denudation and wind erosion. But the recommendations have never been heeded because such changes would require a substantial change in our devotion to self-interest and private ownership.

Only some disinterested group of individuals, or some government agency, could ever undertake such a restoration. They would restore the land not because they were more intelligent than the private landowner but because they would be free to ignore market pressures.

In my view, the most compelling lesson we might learn from the history of the Great Plains is that adaptation to climate can never be achieved merely by privatized, marketplace economics, especially when backed up by generous government relief.

The challenge of cultural adaptation to environment, contrary to the opinion of many technological and scientific experts, has never been easy to meet. If we have not solved the riddle of the country so far, how in heaven's name can we expect to solve it easily on the Plains in that remorseless, unclouded summer that may lie ahead? ■

Donald Worster is a professor of history at the University of Kansas and the author of *Rivers of Empire* and *The Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, among other works.

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Winter in Yellowstone

Steve Fuller

## REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

by Ray Ring

The second time the yahoo lugged the boom box down to where the bloody wreck was holding things up, it nearly touched off a fist fight. Somebody leaped out of the night, cursing, demanding respect for the dead and injured, and grappled for control of the volume knob. Roused, the boom boxer shut off the racket and we had only more uneasy silence.

For hours, through sunset and into darkness, we'd been trapped with each other on the mountainside road that suddenly went nowhere, staring at blue-and-red emergency lights revolving ceaselessly ahead of our line of abruptly idled vehicles.

The lights atop the sheriff's truck became hypnotic, shining across the black abyss edging the narrow pavement and sweeping the canyon wall. Sweep after sweep after sweep.

Like many urban dwellers in the West, we had all cruised up a handy but crowded mountain on a late-summer Sunday for a respite from the heat. We hadn't planned on becoming forcefully acquainted with the risks.

I went with my wife and two young kids. Thirty miles of twisty two-lane took us from the Tucson valley to the 9,100-foot summit of the Santa Catalina range that dominates the city's northern horizon. In a luscious meadow on top we managed to escape the human hordes and discovered the right clumps of grass where ladybugs had massed by the thousands.

We scooped up teeming orange-and-polka-dotted handfuls, let the harmless beetles scurry all over us, tickled by their tiny legs. We had cocoa and melded into heavy traffic that was heading down, past the familiar landmarks: Bear Wallow, Rose Canyon, Windy Point. As sunset neared, savoring the highlighted scenery, we rounded a curve and saw brake lights flaring.

It took a while for the awfulness to become clear. We slowed and caught the truck we'd been trailing and then had to stop, our progress blocked. A wide-eyed man jogged uphill telling everyone: There's a wreck. A small crowd of people was already gathering in the curve ahead, which hid the fresh wreckage.

We got out and began to understand that there were no cops, no firefighters, nobody particularly qualified or in charge. Some people were walking down to do what they could or gawk, some staying in their cars, and already some were complaining about the hitch in their schedules.

I walked down, carrying ice that might help stop the bleeding. A white sedan that had been coming up was mashed in and crushed to the rock wall. A black car that somebody said had been a Camaro coming down had spun around to face uphill, except the face of the car was gone. There was only a tire protruding from a blunted mass of junked metal.

A head-on. From the skid marks it looked like the Camaro had been cutting the inside of the curve, way over the double-yellow centerline. The casualties were strewn about. One woman was still trapped behind the wheel of the sedan. The others were being tended as best as possible by samaritans. Two women were trying to get a man who was bleeding from his eye and head to sit down, and that's where I joined in.

Those of us giving first aid, and the early gawkers, were functioning stunned. Nobody talked loudly. The minutes crept. I'd never thought before how, on this road that was like an old friend, we were a long way from life lines. Somebody had made a call on a car phone. Eventually, a sheriff's truck arrived from above, then a fire truck coming up from below, later more emergency vehicles and ultimately a helicopter roared in to land expertly on the pavement.

As night took hold, the pros commenced evacuations.

I remember the blankets people had pulled out of their vehicles to wrap around the casualties as protection from the evening chill, blankets left behind on the pavement, blood-soaked and no longer wanted.

The tendency these days is to expect, to demand, a quick fix. But the main road down the mountain (the only alternative is dirt and several hours longer) remained blocked by wreckage while the lawmen, who seemed to be in no hurry, measured skid marks and investigated to determine blame. The jammed traffic stretched farther uphill around curve after curve and the crowd swelled. One man who hiked down from the end of the line said he'd counted 217 vehicles, with more still arriving. Emotions had been stripped raw and the mood was changing.

Grumbling spread and grew insistent. In the darkness, as those of us who'd actually witnessed the carnage were outnumbered by later arrivals who merely felt inconvenienced, politeness and shared mission gave way to barely subdued anarchy.

However busy the lawmen were, they seemed to

have manpower to spare by then, but not once did they even send a messenger strolling up the road to assess our population (by then, equal to a small town), report on progress and publicly estimate how much longer the delay might be.

After a day of play, most of us were ill-prepared to last who knew how many additional hours stuck between the car ahead of us and the car behind, with the mountainside rising too steep to climb on the left and plunging down on the right. Some were out of food and low on water. There were kids and babies to tend and who knew how many stalled travelers who might be sick or with potential health problems.

Even the appearance of an authority figure would have reassured. But for whatever reason — oversight, indifference or perhaps subconscious hostility to the crowds whose misfortunes they had to clean up, weekend after weekend — the lawmen huddled down by the wreck, allowing an uprising of speculation, worry and anger, however misguided.

For some of us, the scene inspired hushed conversations about how the road is statistically the most dangerous in the state, and among the 10 most dangerous in the nation (cities in the West tend to have similarly dangerous recreational outlets). Witnesses said the people in the Camaro had apparently been drinking and driving wildly down to their ugly surprise, a typical profile of an accident on the Mt. Lemmon road.

Some of us recounted other occasions of being trapped by high-elevation wrecks, and some swore never to be lured up the mountain again.

Others were, to put it mildly, not inclined to constructive meditation. Boom boxes and car stereos blared, some silenced by neighbors who were offended by any carnival atmosphere. Strings of firecrackers blasted.

After four hours of waiting — watches had become irrelevant, but it was somewhere around 11 p.m. — a horn honked insanely, reverberating down the canyon. Another sounded, and another, until all up and down the canyon horns of all pitches honked and built to a crescendo of frustration. We were doubly trapped now by this outbreak of madness. Things got tense. A woman who'd holed up inside the truck ahead of us yelled blindly out her window, "Knock it off!"

Off and on, the honking would erupt and spread, grate for five or 10 minutes, then subside, only to erupt again, setting off dogs that were trapped here and there with us and threatening to awaken those kids who had managed to drop off to sleep, so long after their normal bedtimes. The honkers didn't have the guts or were too lazy to walk down and confront the lawmen in person. Most of them were so far up the canyon, they couldn't even see the road-block, but they leaned on their horns and shouted at the stars, "Come on!" "Let's go!" "Shove the wrecks over the side!"

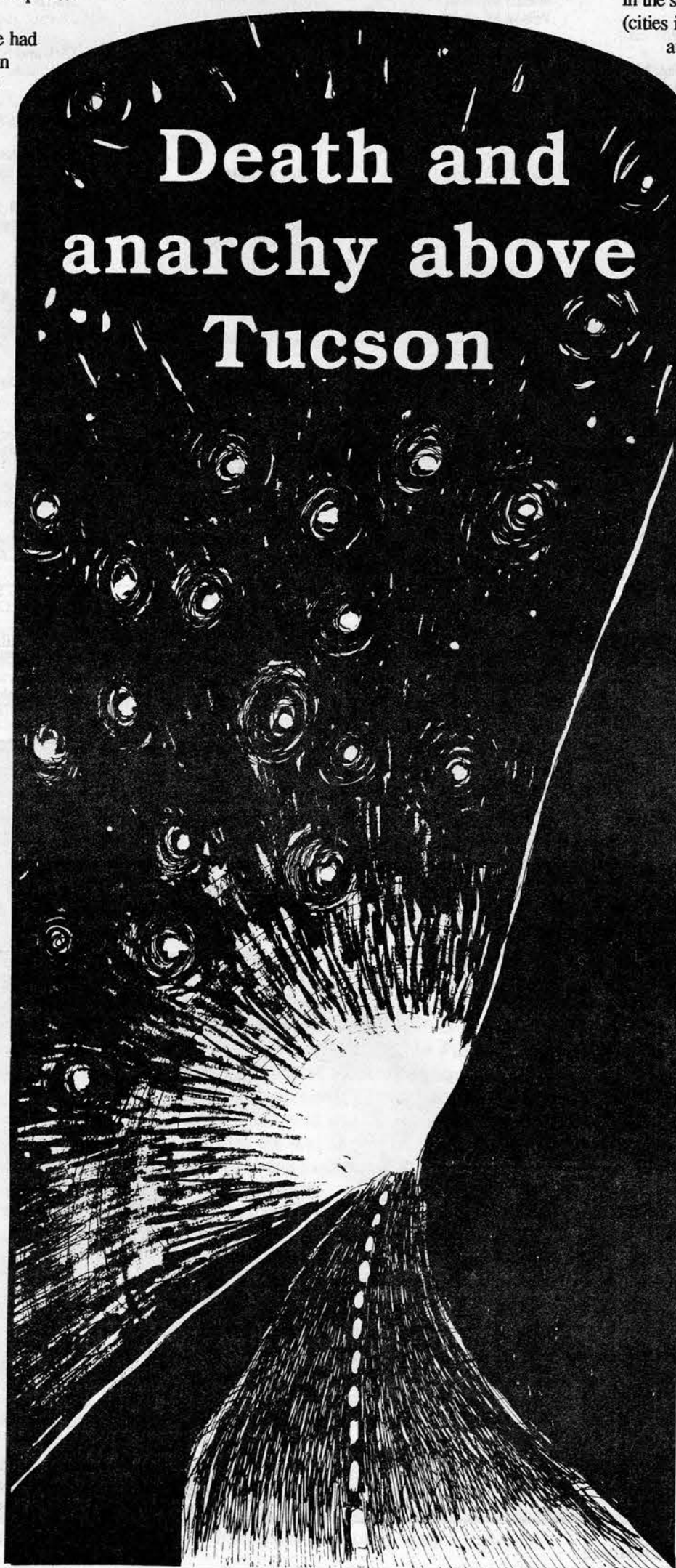
We were on the precipice of more man-made violence. One hero walked slowly up from below, a citizen who'd taken it upon himself to approach each carload of honkers and say quietly but with conviction, "Stop that. I'm a working man, I have to get up in the morning too. You ought to be ashamed of yourself." Somehow he survived.

Near midnight, almost five hours after the wreck, the road was finally cleared and traffic again started to move down the mountain.

Safely back in my routine the next day, I sought out news reports of the wreck and its aftermath, and was frustrated all over again by how the blood and anarchy was reduced to a few fleeting sentences, the brunt of which was the sad, matter-of-fact announcement that the woman trapped in the white sedan, Raelene Montano, 35, of Tucson, had died.

There was nothing about how the wreck had brought out the best and worst in us. And nothing about how some of us might be wary of the mountain now and some had probably learned nothing and would likely be driving the mountain again soon. ■

Ray Ring is a newspaperman turned novelist whose latest book is *Arizona Kiss*.



Diane Sylvain