

Land of Constant Change:

Uncle Sam and the Town Dweller Settle the West

The story of the West is the story of change and transition. Frederick Jackson Turner described these changes perfectly in his famous 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." That pioneering miner/journalist Samuel Clemens, working in Virginia City, Nevada, understood it, too, when he wrote in *Roughing It* that "change is the handmaiden Nature requires to do her miracles with." As Richard White notes in his essay in this issue, nature has been changing the West for eons, humans for a couple of millennia. In recent generations, however, the pace has certainly quickened, thanks to humans.

The Four Corners—where Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado touch—is a beautiful, haunting land of mountains, river valleys, deserts, and mesas that typifies such change. Southwestern Colorado with its rugged San Juan Mountains on its eastern and northern border, has over time transformed into a land of remarkable contrasts. For more than 2,000 years, the people who lived here promoted changes in the land. Even the climate changed, perhaps forcing the region's earliest settlers, the Anasazi, to migrate to a more hospitable land.

Because of the nature of these changes, the Four Corners offers a classic example by which to assess the pattern of western settlement. Turner, who stood at Cumberland Gap and South Pass to witness the frontier passing, could easily—and perhaps more dramatically—have

looked to the Animas Valley of southwestern Colorado. Beginning with the hunter-gatherer Anasazi, famous for their home in the present-day Mesa Verde National Park, the entire saga of the American West marched through the San Juan Basin. The nomadic Utes were next to occupy the grasslands of southwestern Colorado. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Spanish arrived in search of the illusive *El Dorado* of riches and an easily accessed land route to the Pacific.

Fur trappers, miners, town builders, farmers and ranchers followed in the nineteenth century. Mounted troops rode to protect the settlers as railroad builders eased travel and reduced their isolation. Then came health seekers, tourists, and, finally, a new breed of urban dweller. Indeed, history records that much of the change in this rugged,

mountainous domain depended upon or resulted from urbanization. Town dwellers—not cattlemen, farmers, and other “classic” western pioneers—not only influenced permanent and successful settlement, but also charted the course of its future.

Inherent within this settlement pattern, certainly after 1860, was the dominate role of the federal government. For more than a century, Uncle Sam has been a willing partner in fostering change throughout the West. Federal presence in the Four Corners, coupled with accelerated urbanization, has sustained momentum as the twentieth century fades into the twenty-first.

To all who settled there, the West signified the land of opportunity, the promised land of their dreams and expectations. Each group affected the environment and changed what they touched. Each has left his mark on the land; the region changed, sometimes slowly, very often dramatically. Colorado poet Thomas Hornsby Ferril understood this, when he wrote in “Noted”:

Noted: by the time you touch
any twig or grama blade,
you have changed that much.
Noted of a cottonwood:
Hate could crack you down,
War is ever twice as near
as the nearest town.
Noted of a cottonwood:
Love can hold you ever.

The land changed, the people changed—a legend had been born. Love, hate, war, all have played a role

in southwestern Colorado. In the past 130 years, however, three constants have been the driving force for changes that have occurred—transportation, urbanization, and the federal government.

Transportation was and still is a key element in the development of the isolated Four Corners region and its San Juan Mountain communities. There seems little question that the issue of distance played a significant role in Anasazi life; the road system radiating out from present Chaco Culture National Historical Park suggests this. The Chaco people traded with others to the south and west. Doubtless the time required to establish contact, based upon the distance they needed to travel, influenced their decision to abandon the area.

Beginning with the European *entrada*, “innovations” helped overcome the problems of distance and isolation. First, the horse enabled greater mobility while it eased travel. It completely altered Ute life by allowing for a greater concentration of Indians into fewer villages because it reduced the work of hunting. Next came that wonder of the nineteenth century—the railroad. How it improved the daily life of the miners, farmers, ranchers and city dwellers, by providing rapid, year-round transportation at a reduced cost—comforts only dreamed about in earlier years.

Still, isolation and distance gripped the region. Each succession of inhabitants tried their best to resolve these problems. Geographic

isolation has remained the focus of all who have chosen southwest Colorado as their home of residence. In recent years, however, the automobile, truck, and plane promised and delivered much needed improvements. It now takes only hours to reach Denver or Albuquerque, where it used to take days. Nevertheless, consumer markets remain an intimidating number of miles away. Travel to and from business meetings still proves inconvenient, and the cost of goods and services delivered to the area is excessive. In the long term, however, transportation improvements have affected the environment and changed forever the quality of life in the West.

Will Rogers landed in Durango in July 1935. In his newspaper column, Rogers left a perceptive glimpse of the alpine community and its people: "Durango, a beautiful little city, out of the way and glad of it." However, the continuous effort to improve transportation and communications has produced both positive and harmful effects in the Four Corners. For example, it has created new jobs and economic opportunities, but salaries fail to keep pace with national trends because local businesses incur unusually high overhead costs.

Similarly, the communication revolution has dispelled Will Rogers' perceptions of quaintness and simplicity. Through the use of the telephone and the computer/Internet, the Four Corners has narrowed its communication gap to seconds, thus changing forever the work patterns

and life styles of many local residents. Some more fortunate individuals are able to live in the scenic Southwest while holding down high-paying jobs in other localities. From Durango, they establish and maintain contact with people throughout the entire world. In effect, technological innovation—not rugged individualism—has defined the future of the once-isolated San Juan Basin.

Rugged individuals alone did not conquer the West. Rather, ordinary people, with virtually inexhaustive assistance from Uncle Sam, boldly faced and overcame its extraordinary challenges. Nowhere has this love-hate relationship been more clearly demonstrated than in southwestern Colorado, where the federal government played a principal role throughout its history. First, the federal government created Colorado territory in 1861, and during subsequent years did all it could to encourage farmers, miners, railroad builders, and their contemporaries to come west to harvest its natural resources for the benefit of the whole nation. Government influence did not stop there. From something as ordinary—yet, at the time revolutionary—as rural free mail delivery in the early days to the Environmental Protection Agency's removal of Cold War uranium tailings, the federal government left an indelible imprint on the quality of life in southwestern Colorado.

The creation of Mesa Verde National Park in 1906 gave the region its first prime tourist attraction. Mesa

Verde provides a case study of what the federal government can represent to an isolated area. The park is the touchstone, the crown jewel, of non-regulatory federal involvement in southwestern Colorado. Tourism, first noted in the region as early as the 1870s, assumed new meaning with the creation of a national park. The neighboring three communities—Cortez, Mancos, and Durango—quickly realized the benefits of its presence as each community struggled to gain dominance over this windfall.

Similarly, the creation of the San Juan National Forest enhanced attraction to the Four Corners. Here, as elsewhere, vocal Westerners asserted their “right” to use the land, protesting that its resources were being curbed. In the short view, they may have been right; yet, despite local fears, the government persisted, resulting in a second major recreational and tourist attraction in southwestern Colorado.

Government involvement did not cease with these benefits. Land that could not be given away as homesteads throughout the West remained in federal control under newly established agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management. Before this agency, the alphabet agencies of the New Deal pumped money and jobs into the region. Fondly remembered were the activities of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Rural Electric Association. The latter brought electricity—an unprecedented change—to municipalities

where it had never existed.

During World War II and for twenty years afterward, the Atomic Energy Commission energized the region, leaving in its wake a legacy of excellent roads and “hot” mine and mill sites. The Southern Utes and Ute Mountain Utes, whose social and economic development has been tied to Washington since the late 1840s, have recently benefitted from a financial windfall because of the 1987 Supreme Court ruling that Indian tribes could establish legalized gambling. The list could go on. In summary, the fiscal and institutional influence of the federal government has had an astounding long-term impact on this once politically insignificant, economically marginal and thinly populated region.

The significance of the federal government’s role in the Four Corners should not be understated. While not without opposition, the National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and myriad other agencies generally speaking have asserted a positive influence throughout the West. There is no question that their impact has been positive in southwestern Colorado. In the first place, these federal agencies have preserved the land; including tremendous natural resources and scenic attractions in the San Juan National Forest as well as Mesa Verde National Park. What would the region have been like without them?

Indeed, the credo of the West

might read: Where Washington went, change followed. Above all, urbanization has been the most active catalyst for change. Cities and towns "conquered" the west, not the so-beloved legendary individuals and industries. Mining, that paramount energizer of urban development, came early to the San Juans. Telluride, Ouray, Silverton and a generation of smaller towns and camps brought urbanization to full flower. While many of these communities died (producing yet another tourist attraction), they hardly can be defined as failures. They served a purpose as support agencies for the mines; when mining activity ended, so did their reason for existence.

In the long term, however, the mining camps attracted farmers, ranchers, railroads, tourists, roads, industry, and neighbor communities. They opened the region and sustained it until a broader-based economy could take root. Telluride, Durango, and Cortez in Colorado, as well as Farmington, New Mexico, exert influence over a region that looks rural, but is in fact highly urbanized. The transition from ruralism to urbanization happened, but not without heartache. It has been ongoing for well over a century and continues to the present day. Most of the newcomers who profess their desire to live in a "rural setting" and who cherish their "rural life style," are, in reality, completely urbanized.

What, then, is the future of the rural population and the Four Corners' communities? Transition has re-

vamped the traditional economy. If it were not for the federal (and to a lesser degree, the state) government, tourism, and increasing computer-generated opportunities, the region today would be faced with widespread economic problems and a declining population base. Miners no longer dig except for a handful of coal mines; ranching is only a shadow of what it once was; lumbering has disappeared; and the railroad has been converted into a tourist attraction. While farming is still evident, it remains hampered by isolation and weather, just as it was 100 years ago. Modern day farmers cannot raise anything "exotic," which might give them a market advantage, because of the short growing season and the semi-arid environment. Also, because of transportation difficulties, heavy industry has never taken hold in the region.

Much of this tremendous transition has occurred since World War II, but some of it has roots over the past century. What has enabled the region to weather these fundamental changes in large measure has been the federal government's land-use policy. Without the development of the ski industry, the creation of national forests, and establishment of national parks, the Four Corners' communities might never have flourished. In addition, the Atomic Energy Commission's road building program not only eased transportation but also stimulated tourism by opening a vital link to southern California through Flagstaff and the Navajo reservation.

Thanks to the development of the ski industry, tourism has become a year-round industry. The economies of Telluride and Durango, once declining mining towns, have been strengthened because of skiing. Still, while tourism touches every aspect of life in the Four Corners from the farmer to the urbanite, it cannot provide a guarantee that all is well. Just as with the federal government, there exists a love-hate relationship with tourism. Four Corners' residents complain about traffic, uncontrolled growth, inconsiderate visitors, pollution from the vehicles as well as smoke from the train, and crowded conditions where locals once enjoyed open space.

The federal government has even played a role in higher education. In 1910 the government sold Fort Lewis, a one-time military post and Indian boarding school, to the State of Colorado after which it evolved into the four-year college that now resides in Durango. Today, Fort Lewis College represents one of the region's most successful economic, cultural, and educational foundations.

Nevertheless, Uncle Sam has not always been appreciated. The so-called Sagebrush Rebellion may be history, but not the circumstances that caused it. People in the West persistently resent the presence federal government; they protest its rules and regulations. Although many farmers and ranchers receive federal subsidies, they resent the strings that are attached. "Federal regulations"

are fighting words in southwest Colorado.

Water, too, has produced fighting words. The ongoing debate concerning the Animas-La Plata Reclamation Project illustrates the continuous struggle between regionalism and federalism. Will this be the last great federal water project? Regional expansion depends on the availability of water; once again, Washington's involvement is crucial. Its role in building the Vallecito, Lemon, McPhee, Navajo, and, most recently, McPhee storage reservoirs has provided both water and recreational opportunities to the region. Agriculturists and urbanites have each benefited. Without federal presence, nothing of this scope could have been accomplished.

In retrospect, it has been villages and towns that have come to dominate the region's economy and foster its social diversification. People come for the scenery and the tourist attractions, but most stay to become residents of these hinterland communities. They find employment, most of their cultural and educational amenities, and other urban allurements—as well as the urban problems that face most Americans. The future of southwestern Colorado is tied, as it has always been, to its urban centers.

The transition goes on; people are coming to live in southwestern Colorado because its livable here. They enjoy the climate, savor the scenery, as they continue to work in Los Angeles or Chicago. They achieve this wonder because they can work by

Internet and computers, or even commute, as some do, to work a few days each month. One obvious consequence has been an increase in real estate values and building fancy homes with wonderful mountain vistas. The money they bring has both helped and hurt. But old-timers probably said the same thing about newcomers to the San Juan Basin at the turn of the century.

The result of this ongoing change, in a real sense, the region's "New Western History." Residents of the West must accept the change, they cannot recreate something, a vanished past, a dream of a perceived yesterday. They must look at the present and plan for the future and not bemoan what has happened in the last thirty or forty years. Old timers might think the whole world has gone to "hell in a hand basket." It has not. Stewardship or greed, one or the other, holds the future in its hands—the choice has to be made.

Change has been constant, transition an ongoing feature of life in the Four Corners. In the words of the English poet, Charles Kingsley, in his poem "Old and New":

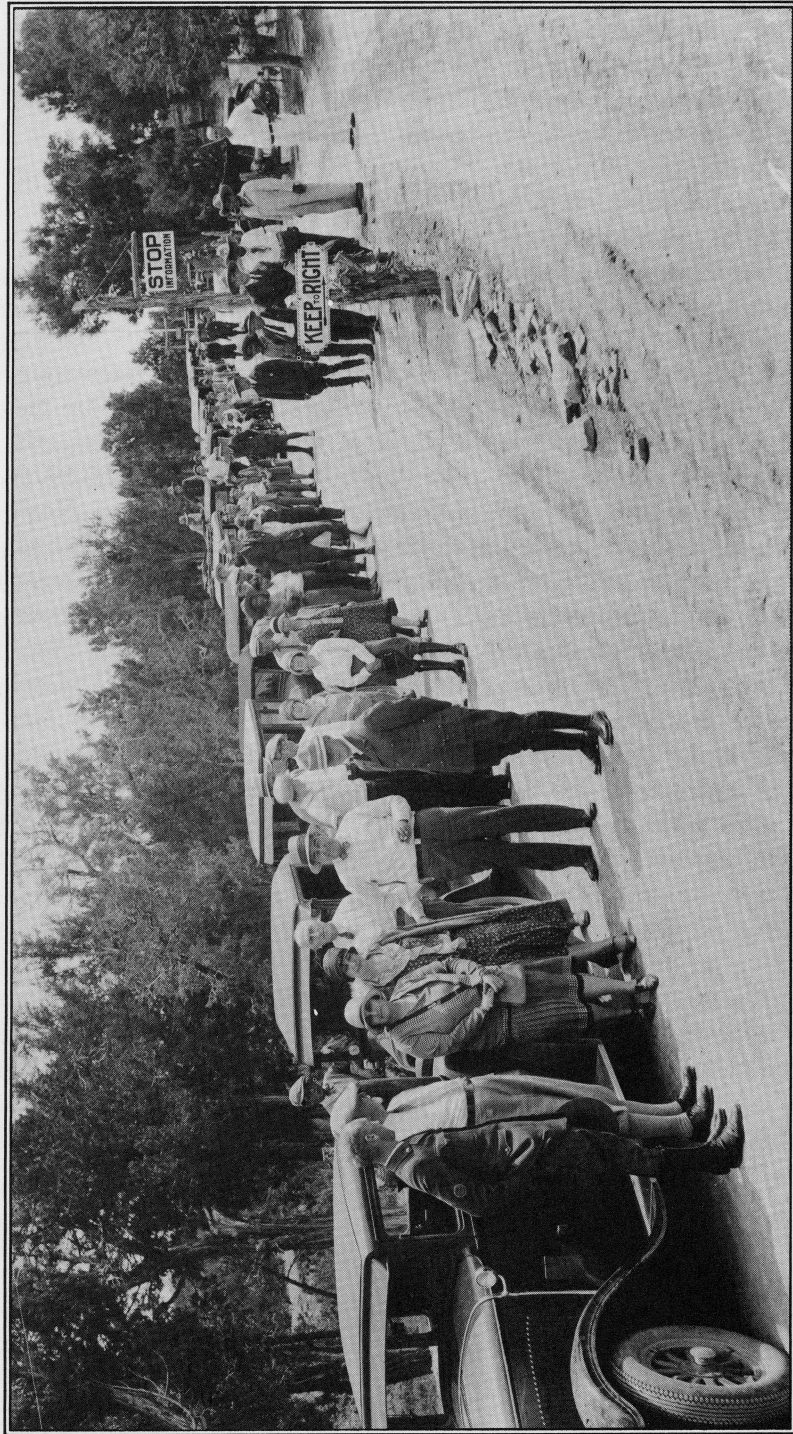
So fleet the works of men back to
the earth again,
Ancient and holy things fade like a
dream.



For further reading on this fascinating land see: Art Gómez, *Quest for the Golden Circle: The Four Corners and the Metropolitan West 1945-1970* (Albuquerque, 1994); Allen Nosaman, *Many More Mountains* (Denver, 1989, 1993), 2 volumes; Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Boom Town* (Niwot, Colorado, 1992 edition), and his *Shadows of the Centuries: A History of Mesa Verde National Park* (Lawrence, 1988); and Carl Ubbelohde, et al., *A Colorado History* (Boulder, 1995).



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A 1929 throng awaits the start of a Mesa Verde "auto caravan." Already the park was becoming crowded as the public flocked to this popular attraction that has economically benefited southwestern Colorado for ninety years. *Courtesy: Mesa Verde National Park.*