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THE AMERICAN WEST

Perpetual Mirage

WALTER PRESCOTT WEBB

The West's leading historian uncovers the one overwhelming fact which seventeen states have been trying to hide for the last century.

THIS is an attempt to discover what the West is and why it is that way. We shall not approach it from the outside; we shall begin in the middle, because that is where its dominating force—The Desert—resides.

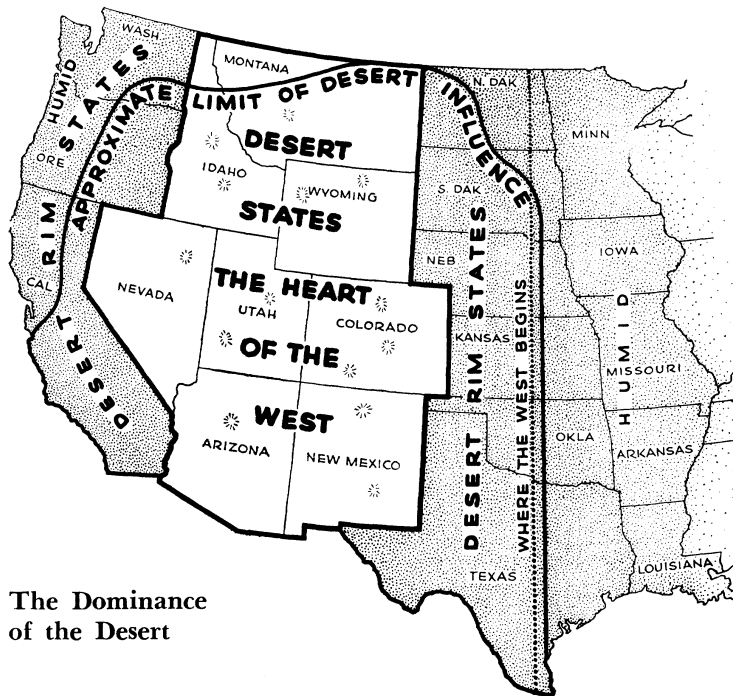
Fortunately the West is no longer a shifting frontier, but a region that can be marked off on a map, traveled to, and seen. Everybody knows when he gets there. It starts in the second tier of states west of the Big River. A line drawn from the southern tip of Texas to the farther boundary of central North Dakota marks roughly its eastern boundary. It starts almost in the tropics; it reaches almost to the northern limits of the Temperate Zone. Hemmed in by Canada on the north and Mexico on the south, it runs with the sun to the Pacific. It comprises more than half of the nation's area—all or part of seventeen very large states. The air-line dis-

tance around it is one-fifth the distance around the earth. This is the West, as distinguished from the other two great regions, the North and the South.

Internally the West is divided into three strips, laid one beside the other on a north-south axis—a mountain strip in the center flanked by the Great Plains strip to the east and the Pacific slope strip to the west. These gigantic natural features give variety and part of the character to the country; but they do not explain it, either separately or in combination. One can never understand the West—all of it—in terms of the rolling plains, the craggy mountains, or the slope to the sea, for none is common to the entire region. They divide rather than unify; they do not bind the West to its inevitable destiny.

The overriding influence that shapes the West is the desert. That is its one unifying force. It permeates the plains, climbs to all but the highest mountain peaks, dwells continuously in the valleys, and plunges down the Pacific slope to argue with the sea.

The desert is the guest that came to dinner, never to go away. It has stripped the mountains of their vegetation, making them "rocky"; it has dried up the inland seas, leaving Death Valley completely dry and Lake Bonneville a briny fragment in Great Salt Lake. It is the great designer of the American West, painting the



The Dominance of the Desert

landscape with color, chiseling the mesas and pinnacles, building the plains with soil washed down by perishing rivers such as the Platte and Canadian. It shortened the grass on its borders before destroying it in the interior. It never permitted trees on the plains it built, and where it found them it beat them down to sage and brush, reducing the leaves to thorns and the sap to grease and oil. The trees it could not destroy it shriveled, and those it could not shrivel it petrified.

The desert designed the animals as it shaped the land. It compelled its creatures to conform to its colors, put horns on toads, made snakes travel sidewise to keep from sinking in the sand, created grasshoppers that fly five miles for a sprig of grass. It made them all parsimonious of water. The rabbits require little if any, the antelope do without for long periods, some rodents and plants (like the Joshua tree) manufacture and store their own. The little prairie dog is a desert masterpiece. He is a misnamed squirrel, because the Americans who named him could not believe that a squirrel would live in a dugout. As for water, he will not touch the stuff.

What is *at the heart* of the West? Where is the center from which the shaping force and power radiate? The answer is simple if we would only see and accept it. The heart of the West is a desert, unqualified and absolute. Draw a line anywhere from the region's eastern boundary to the Pacific, stand on its mid-point,

and you will find yourself either in the desert or near it.

If we do not understand the West it is because we perversely refuse to recognize this fact: we do not want the desert to be there. We prefer to loiter on its edges, skirt it, avoid it, and even deny it.

Instead, let us go to the center of the desert's greatest intensity, and from there measure the radius of its diminishing influence. There it lies around us in all its terror and desolate beauty, its sands shimmering in the distance, its mirages playing tricks with our vision, its mountains etched against the sky, a crosscut saw with some teeth knocked out.

This is the best of the desert, the worst of the West. Its radius varies because the desert ex-

pands and contracts, as its enemy—rain—retreats or advances. Always at its margins there is dampness, at its borders moisture, at its limits wetness. When the desert pokes a hot finger into the border regions, the people speak of drought; when it pulls the finger back, they say "the country is getting more seasonable." At the heart of the desert there is no drought, there is only an occasional mitigation of dryness.

WHAT NOBODY MENTIONS

THE influence of the desert from the center outward is comparable to the effect of a fire. If we keep a gigantic fire going for a long enough time, we will have where it was and around it a replica of the American West. In the center will be an area where all life has been destroyed, a charred mass such as may be seen in parts of Utah, Idaho, and Nevada. Beyond that will be a series of concentric circles where the destruction decreases as the distance grows. While the fire is burning you can escape its heat by going outward from it, or by going upward. So today, in the mountain state, you may go above it.

For a million years a fire of low intensity has been burning, and is still burning, in the West. It is broader and more intense in the south, narrower and somewhat cooler in the north. It covers the eight central states marked "desert states" on the map, and it scorches the near side

of their flanking neighbors—the rim states, east and west—giving all nine of them large desert areas.

This analogy of the fire is useful because fire, like the desert, is a positive thing. We have usually explained the West in negative terms, lack of wetness, rather than by the presence of dryness. We have adopted a series of progressively wetter terms, arid, semi-arid, and sub-humid—to describe the relative distance from the devil of dryness. Our aversion to deserts has led us into deceitful euphemisms, the lifted verbal hand shielding off the uncomfortable heat of reality. Let us here be realistic and divide the West in two categories, Desert States and Desert-rim States.

We have not always been dishonest about the presence of the desert. The early explorers thought they knew one when they saw it. They called it by name, and until after the Civil War they put it on school maps. Before the middle of the sixteenth century, Coronado wrote: "It was the Lord's pleasure that, after having journeyed across these deserts seventy-seven days, I arrived at . . . Quivira." From Montana territory, Ordway of the Lewis and Clark expedition confided to his journal that "this country may with propriety be called the Deserts of North America." Zebulon Pike, farther south, said, "These vast plains . . . may become as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa." In 1859 Horace Greeley wrote from the buffalo range that "we are in a desert indeed." By 1835 the school maps showed the Great American Desert in block letters east of the Rockies. By 1850 such men as Daniel Webster and Jefferson Davis conceded its existence, and staked their political fortunes on their belief.

After the Civil War the Great American Desert was abolished. It has hardly been mentioned in polite Western society since, and *never* by the Chambers of Commerce. Of course, there were some small tourist deserts left, such as the Mohave and the Jornada Del Muerto, but nothing of consequence. The desert did not know it had been abolished; it waited patiently as puny men moved in from all sides to conquer it. Enough time has now elapsed to reveal the results of this impertinence.

While the annual rainfall for each state has not been found in the reference books, we do have it for selected cities, at least one in each state. These figures are a little high, because the larger cities are likely to be in the region of most rainfall. Though the figures are not exact, they are significant.

Average Annual Precipitation

8 Desert States	12.00"	semi-arid
6 Eastern Rim States	24.20"	subhumid
3 Western Rim States	26.48"	subhumid

The Desert States barely escape the true desert mark of 10 inches. The rim states are sub-humid. The average for the entire West is 20 inches, the upper limit of the semi-arid.

The significant thing about these figures is that they form a pattern which matches nearly all the yardsticks we use to measure the assets of a civilization. The pattern of precipitation is relatively high in the rim states and low in the desert states. The same is true of people, bank deposits, factories, cities, horses, mules, cattle, and all farm crops. (One exception is sheep; there are more sheep per square mile in the desert states than in either rim. The same is true of hard minerals.)

When this pattern is drawn, the West, especially in its desert part, appears as a depressed region. The rim states are populous and rich as compared to the vast interior. The rim states of Texas and California have about twenty million people as against less than six million for the eight desert states. Texas has about thirty persons per square mile, California about sixty-eight, but the desert states have only six. Texas and California combined had as of 1951 bank assets or liabilities of about \$25 billion, as against less than \$6 billion for the eight desert states with nearly twice the area.

These figures indicate what the desert has done to those who set out to conquer it. It emerges in its true character as a great interior force—repelling to people and repulsive to wealth in nearly all forms. Though surrounded and beleaguered, the Great American Desert has not been conquered; instead it has shaped the lives and destinies of those who went against it. That is what Major John Wesley Powell saw when he wrote in 1878 that "a new phase of Aryan civilization is being developed in the western half of America."

THE FIRST DEFEATS

IF THE figures above have given the impression that the rim states have escaped the desert or conquered it, and are now safe beyond the danger line, that impression must be corrected. To correct it, we need to look at man's first general attack, that of the 1880s, which coincided with a wet cycle in the West. Since the attackers came from the humid country, they

struck the eastern rim states first. They went single-handed, with high hopes; they returned before the onslaught of the drought, empty-handed. A. M. Simons summed up the campaign in these words:

From the 98th meridian west to the Rocky Mountains there is a stretch of country filled with more tragedy and whose future is pregnant with greater promise than perhaps any other equal expanse of territory within the confines of the Western Hemisphere.

The disorderly charge and the ensuing rout were thus described:

Following times of occasional rainy season, the line of social advance rose and fell with rain and drought, like a mighty tide beating against the wall of the Rockies. And every such wave left behind it a mass of human wreckage in the shape of broken fortunes, deserted farms, and ruined homes.

Later, Frederick H. Newell said: "The Great Plains can be characterized as a region of periodic famine."

The attackers withdrew, but returned with two new allies, science and invention. By ingenuity they would destroy the desert in spite of hell and without water. They made headway in the rim-land by inventing barbed wire, adapting the windmill, learning about dry farming, importing desert plants, reshaping their plows, and revising their laws.

Their hopes always outran their accomplishments. What was discovered today would enable them to complete the conquest tomorrow. In the face of tragedy they became superstitious or religious, and called in the rain-makers with magic, dynamite, and prayer, and later with a chemical calculated to make a dry cloud give water.

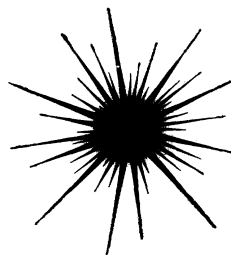
The federal government enlisted on the side of The People *vs.* The Desert. It sought dam sites and blocked the rivers to create tiny islands of water in a sea of aridity. In the meantime the well-drillers were probing the earth to discover every aquifer, or underground water deposit. Pumps were installed to bring up water for homes, cities, and irrigation, and every source of water—whether from river, lake, or well—was declared to be "everlasting."

Regardless of the source of the water, its major effect was to create an oasis, a lovely word implying a pleasant place in the midst of a larger and less pleasant one. In and around the oasis people came to build towns and cities, establish industry, and open irrigated farms.

This has happened all over the West, so that the West is today virtually an oasis civilization.

The concept of the oasis has not apparently been used in reference to the West, and cannot be used as long as we persist in denying the desert. The Chambers of Commerce would not be pleased if we referred to such oases of elevation as Denver, Boulder, and Rapid City; of such river oases as Santa Fe and El Paso; of the spring-made oasis of San Antonio; of the man-made oasis of Boulder City, Nevada; or of the well-based (and probably temporary) oasis of Lubbock, Texas. Los Angeles is the greatest oasis of them all.

One of the paradoxes of the West is that with its excess of land and dearth of people, it is already an urban society. The eight desert states are 54.9 per cent urban. Only Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho are rural. Utah, with only 8.4 people per square mile, is 65.3 per cent urban; Nevada, with only 1.5 persons per square mile, is 57.2 per cent urban. The desert has driven the people in to the oasis.



Within the desert states, the people have not overdrawn their water supply. They have struck a balance with their possibilities. This is not true in the rim states where the great cities are. Today most of these cities have out-

grown their water supply and are in crisis. They have exhausted the water that made the original oasis, and their problem now is to find more at any cost. They go farther and farther to get it, and bring it in at increasing expense. Here are some examples.

Los Angeles is in an area of about 16 inches of rainfall. "Fresh water issuing from the hills led to the choice of the original site." It was begun on the little river of its name. The people congregated here and consumed the original supply of water. In 1913 the Los Angeles aqueduct was completed across the Sierra Nevada range to a new source 233 miles distant. The original cost for the aqueduct alone was \$25,000,000. The city outgrew this supply, and in 1939 an aqueduct was built to the Colorado, 242 miles away at a cost of \$200,000,000. But this is not enough, and a plan is afoot to tap the waters of the Columbia, in the northwest, to enlarge or save the oasis of southern California.

El Paso began as a river oasis on the Rio Grande. As it grew the upstream water was pumped out, and the river failed. The underground water was tapped, to fail in turn. The government built Elephant Butte Dam to catch the floodwater, but it cannot keep the river running. Today El Paso is acquiring dam sites in the Guadalupe Mountains, one hundred miles east; it is leasing underground water from the University of Texas lands in Hudspeth County, forty miles from the city.

San Antonio, a real rim city with close to 30 inches of rainfall, was created by the living springs that gushed out to form the San Pedro and San Antonio rivers—tiny but dependable streams. Later the city got its water from artesian wells of tremendous head and volume. Today San Pedro Springs are completely dry; the San Antonio Springs are reduced to a token, and the rivers they fed are gone. The water table has fallen, the artesian wells no longer flow. The city has few good dam sites in its territory, and is desperately pleading with the state water board to let it acquire water from the Guadalupe River basin fifty miles away.

The visitor is always shown the San Antonio River which winds through the heart of the city. The river is, so far as the visitor can see, an exotic thing; its sides are curbed, its low banks a riot of tropical plants. Boats ply back and forth carrying tourists to points of interest. The river flows full here, almost level with its curb—full of water now being pumped from the wells which are no longer artesian. This is the price a proud and beautiful rim city is paying to perpetuate its oasis-like character.

Dallas never shows anybody the little river on which it was born, the rat-tailed Trinity that served it well for a time. Dallas too is a proud city, consciously cultured, not joyously relaxed and playful like San Antonio, or boisterous and natural like its own near-neighbor, Fort Worth. Dallas will probably deny that it is an oasis, what with its 30-plus inches of rainfall. But let us look at its water problem: Before it outgrew the Trinity, it found an “everlasting” supply in artesian wells which have now failed or become inadequate. It began to build dams, but not in time to meet the drought. In desperation Dallas built a pipeline to the Red River, which gathers its waters high up on the salty plains and semi-desert. Today a glass of Dallas water left overnight has a saline scum on the surface in the morning. Peddlers of potable imported water have done well at fifty cents a gallon.

The last example is the underground oasis of

Lubbock, Texas. There is no spring near, and it is many miles to a river. Lubbock stands on the High Plains where the annual rainfall is about 18 inches. It grew like a mushroom because a state college was built there, oil was discovered, and an “everlasting” supply of water was found underneath the fertile soil. This High Plains aquifer is of enormous extent, making possible a giant oasis covering several counties. Turbine pumps whirl day and night, pouring out streams from 4 to 8 inches in diameter. Crop yields are enormous. This is the story of the rise of an oasis based on ground water.

The story of the fall cannot be told because it has not happened. Lubbock sees the crisis coming, and is trying to avert it by acquiring water rights in the sandhills to the west. The water table is falling as new wells go down and old ones are deepened.

The story of the five cities could be continued with variations all around the semi-arid rim of the arid region. It is a story of cities that got a little too close, all haunted now by a growing consciousness that in every oasis the desert rides outside. What lies outside was described by a real authority, none other than Moses. “And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron. The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed.”

WHAT THE WEST HASN'T GOT

ONCE we recognize the desert as the major force in the American West, we are able to understand its history. With our feet planted firmly on a desert base, what hitherto seemed strange, irrational, bizarre, becomes logical and reasonable. Granted the prevailing influence of the desert, it is obvious that the West is in comparison to the East a land of deficiencies. It is full of negatives and short on positives. This obvious fact was first noted by examining ten standard school histories to see the relative amount of space devoted to the western three-fifths of the country occupied by a little more than one-fifth of the people.

The results were unbelievable. At one extreme the West got one and one-half pages out of a hundred; at the other extreme it got fifteen. The average for the ten books was six or seven pages out of a hundred. This disparity could not be explained by either bias or ignorance or prejudice of the authors, but it had to be explained, made logical and reasonable.

Below is a list of the positives and negatives of the West:

<i>Negatives</i>	<i>Positives</i>
Water	Land
Timber	Grass
Cities	Minerals
Industry	Natural Wonders
Labor	Indians
Negroes	Oriental

A study of these columns gives a clue to the brevity of Western history. The scarcity of water, timber, cities, industry, labor, and Negroes in the desert means the absence of many problems about which historians write. Their presence in the rim states is considerable. For example, practically all the timber is in East Texas, Oklahoma, and the three Pacific states. The Negro problem exists only in Texas and California, and it did not come to California until after World War I. Manufacturing amounts to only 14 per cent of the national total—and since there is little manufacturing, there is little to say about labor.

The column of positives gives us the main subjects about which the historians must write. Three of them—land, minerals, and natural wonders—cannot be destroyed by the desert. Many of the natural wonders, the Petrified Forest, the Painted Desert, and the Grand Canyon it created. The grass it tolerated on its rim. On the land men laid down dry farming and irrigation; on the grass they established the Cattle Kingdom; and on the minerals they built mining. All have been producers of raw products, and each destructive. The farmers with the help of the wind destroyed the soil, the cattle the grass, and the miners removed an irreplaceable resource. The natural wonders, in which the West abounds, have produced annually an increased crop of tourists, whose emblem is the desert water bag. They may prove the West's most dependable asset.

UNCLE SAM'S PEOPLE

THE West is the home of four-fifths of the surviving Indians, and nearly all their reservations. It is the domicile of four-fifths of the Japanese and three-fifths of the Chinese in this country. It is the home of nearly all people of Spanish-Mexican descent. Paradoxically, contrary to the general opinion, it is in the Toynbee sense the most cosmopolitan region of the nation. The North is peopled by many nationali-

ties, but nearly all belong to the Western civilization. The West has all these plus the Indian civilization and the Oriental.

The concentration of the Indians in the West suggests how the desert has been used as a place to discard what is unwanted elsewhere. In their rush westward, the Americans drove the Indians toward the desert to be the wards of Uncle Sam. In the same movement they took the land from Uncle Sam, all they considered worth taking. The refuse—mainly in the desert—they left in the hands of the government. Here Uncle Sam is the biggest landholder; he owns 47.7 per cent of the land in the eight desert and three Pacific states. He owns 87.4 per cent of Nevada, 65.3 per cent of Idaho, 64.6 per cent of Utah, 51.8 per cent of Oregon, 47.7 per cent of Wyoming, 46.2 per cent of California. He owns it mainly because nobody wanted it. Here he established the national parks and forests. The Mormons, like the Indians, fled to it because they were not wanted, and all inland atomic explosions are touched off in the desert. (But ancestors of many of the best people in the West today went there because they were "wanted" elsewhere in another sense.)

In the columns above we listed six negatives and six positives. We now must add a seventh negative indicated by the short shrift the West gets in the standard histories. There the historian is deprived of that indispensable ingredient of history, chronology. Aside from the Spanish effort which resulted in failure, everything that happened there occurred yesterday—almost within the long life of one man. Historically, the West has no depth, no long background of slow development. Its story is told in current events. It came on the scene too late to participate in the founding of the nation or to prevent its dissolution in the Civil War. The result is that it has not yet produced a great statesman. Only two Presidents, Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower, have come from the region: only one was born there, and he rarely mentions it except at campaign time, and in the state of his birth.

Aside from the Battle of San Jacinto, there has never been a military conflict on Western soil that had the slightest influence on national affairs.

The twenty-volume *Dictionary of American Biography* gives a sketch of every American who has had significance in our history. An examination of the 1,252 names listed under the letter B revealed that only 99 (8 per cent) had any connection with the West. The current *Who's Who* lists 45,227 biographies, but only

7,369 (16.7 per cent) are from the West. These percentages run far below the 22 per cent of the population now in the West.

Eighty-six people have been voted into the American Hall of Fame, but there is not a Western man among them.

The federal government has set up fifty-seven sites of national historic character, and of these only two are in the West, one commemorating Theodore Roosevelt and one in the Black Hills honoring Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt—not notable for being Westerners. All national *historical* parks and sites, battlefields, and cemeteries are in the East, the boot hills of the West not yet having attained national recognition.

What is the biographer going to do for a region that has so few men of distinction? What is the historian going to do with a country almost without chronology or important battles or great victories or places where armies have surrendered or dead soldiers were buried? How can he make a thick history out of such thin material?

BRIEF AND BIZARRE

TWO characteristics of Western history emerge from the situation: Western history is brief and it is bizarre. It is brief because the time is so short and its material deficient.

Western history is bizarre because of the nature of what it has got. The historians and other writers do what men have always done in the desert. They make the best of what little they do have. Westerners have developed a talent for taking something small and blowing it up to giant size, as a photographer blows up a photograph.

They write of cowboys as if they were noble knights, and the cowmen kings. They do biographies of bad men, Billy the Kid, the Plummer gang, and Sam Bass, of bad women like Calamity Jane, of gunmen like Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok, of cowmen like Goodnight, of miners like Death Valley Scotty and Silver Dollar Tabor. They blow the abandoned saloon up into an art museum, and Boot Hill into a shrine for pilgrims. In Montana Charlie Russell is better than Titian, and in the Black Hills Frederick Remington is greater than Michelangelo. Custer, who blundered to his death, taking better men with him, found a place in every saloon not already pre-empted to that travesty on decency and justice, Judge Roy Bean.

This talent for making the most of little has

produced two strange Western societies, one good and one bad. The good society is that of the Mormons in Utah, a rejected people with a bizarre religion who sought peace in the desert, took the bee as their symbol, and created by their hive-like industry something admirable.

The other society of more recent vintage sprang up in a similar desert, but took a different direction. No state has less to recommend it than Nevada. It is all desert and, once its minerals were depleted, it had little chance of prosperity and hardly enough people to maintain a state government. It solved its problem by creating an oasis of iniquity and license in a sea of moral inhibitions. It provided a haven in the desert to which all could come who wanted to gamble, divorce, or fornicate and have it quick and legal. Then it found it could have a monopoly only on the first two, and so substituted for the third the abolition of state income tax to attract the millionaires who make good customers at the casinos. Nevada was revolutionized, its population shortly doubled, and it has had the highest income per capita of any state in the Union. Nevada is what it is today because of what it did not have yesterday. In compensating for what the desert denied it, it has created the most bizarre society in the nation.

As we look at the West with its dry center and rims of less dryness, we see that the desert is the unifying force. True, the people have moved into the oases, some of them man-made, but for the most part they dwell around its moist edges where they struggle for water with all their ingenuity. They are a normal people trying to create and maintain a normal civilization in an abnormal land.

They are like a musician performing on a giant stringed instrument with many of the strings missing. The missing strings put extraordinary demands on the performer. He must make the best of what he has; he must compensate by ingenuity, agility, and improvisations for the missing strings. His range is limited, his repertoire reduced. He cannot follow the musical conventions, will try anything, and we should not be surprised that the effects are sometimes odd. We can understand him better if we remember that he is seeking to conquer the Great American Desert. As the Preacher said: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever." And so does the desert in the heart of the American West.