## Ellie Ellis

## Never again the same: The Effects of the Journey Westward

The American West was one of the last terrestrial frontiers: when the entire continent had been mapped, humanity for the first time had charted all of the regions which it inhabits. The process of exploring the western hemisphere began in force when European ships landed in the Americas, thus revealing the land to the rest of the world, and continued for the next four hundred years. In some ways, it continues to this day.

Exploring that land was a daring and perilous undertaking, and few if any of the people who did so came back to civilization as the same people they were when they left. If they were lucky enough to survive the western wilderness, they did so forever changed by their experience – of course, many people never returned at all. And yet, despite the dangers – unknown land, potentially hostile natives, megafauna unlike any ever known in Europe – there was something about the "wild west" that drew people, in body and in imagination. It was dangerous, romantic, a realm of alien wonders like nothing that any European had ever imagined. The draw of the west was hinged upon an inescapable human curiosity to see what was out there, over the next hill or around the next bend in the river.

That it was explored at all is testament to this lure, but it has also been well documented, both in classic older works like the journals of Lewis and Clark and in more recent works such as On The Road and A Walk Across America. In my thesis, I intend to explore all of these works, as well as older accounts of travels westward which speak to the lure of the open wilderness and the riches and adventures that it held. The philosophy of manifest destiny will also play a role in this part of my thesis, because it played a huge role in establishing the lure of the west or in highlighting the draw which people were feeling regardless. This acceptance and popularization of the idea that this land was meant for Europeans to settle and use doubtless encouraged people to follow their urges towards exploration and westward expansion.

One of the main focuses of my thesis will be to examine the changes wrought by such a journey and its encounters. During their travels west, people were inevitably transformed as they faced hardship and danger, came upon vistas like nothing of which they could ever have dreamed, and found new lands to call home. They faced tremendous difficulties in a land they knew nothing about, but they kept coming, they adapted, and they survived. I have read accounts of



this transformation both from the early days of westward expansion (primary documents such as those gathered in Distant Horizon and those in analytic form written by William Goetzmann and others) and from more modern sources (e.g. All the Pretty Horses, Jeremiah Johnson, Into the Wild), as well as gathered observations and experiences of my own during a semester-long road trip through the American southwest and a four-month stint working in Yellowstone National Park. There, a coworker of mine referred to working and living in Yellowstone as a coming-ofage experience, one to which "friends at home" cannot possibly understand or relate, an opinion with which I agreed wholeheartedly. The sort of people who went west, my father once said, were the ones who weren't afraid to take risks and abandon everything they'd ever known. While this applies to every person who ever came to the New World from Europe, it applies even more to those who continued the westward push, hoping to find India, the Northwest passage, the Buenaventura, the Promised Land.

Because of the great changes wrought by such adventures, there have always been people who found themselves unable or unwilling to return to the civilization of the east coast. Some people, having had a taste of the life they could have out west, remained there for the rest of their lives. They became the link that civilization had to those alien wonders of the west: through their dealings with and their understanding of the vast western wilderness, they became half-alien themselves. Sometimes under pay and protection of the nascent United States government, sometimes not, these men became the mountain men, the trappers, the cowboys, and the explorers who have made their way into the mythical idea of the American West.

I intend to use the published accounts and my own stories of these expeditions and transformations to present a narrative of the ways that the west has changed those who dared explore it, thereby creating such archetypal characters as the cowboy and the mountain man, and, through my own experiences working in the Park, how the west continues to change us today.

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