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# Mystics, Radicals, Sinners, and Saints: Freedom, Rebirth, and the American West

Brian King

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**MYSTICS, RADICALS, SINNERS, AND SAINTS:  
FREEDOM, REBIRTH, AND THE AMERICAN WEST**

**by**

**BRIAN S. KING**

B.A., History, University of Texas at Austin, 1993  
M.A., History, New Mexico State University, 2007

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
History**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December 2013**

## **DEDICATION**

For Dr. Ferenc Szasz for inspiring my pursuit of knowledge as well as my love of history.

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the lives of John Muir, the Taos Society of Artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Everett Ruess, Edith Warner, and the Taos hippies who journeyed to the American West in search of freedom. In the Western setting, with its diverse yet distinctive and stunning terrain, these individuals felt that their mind or soul—not just their physical body—had been liberated. They felt reborn. In the grand Sierras, John Muir discovered that physical and spiritual freedoms were intertwined. The Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan found their connection with the natural world in northern New Mexico where three cultures mingled against the backdrop of the Sangre de Christo Mountains. Everett Ruess spent four years wandering the Four-Corners canyonland region writing poetry, numerous letters, and painting, intermittently returning to Los Angeles and San Francisco. His connection with the West grew as he felt free—physically, socially, and spiritually. Edith Warner fled Pennsylvania and awakened along the banks of the Rio Grande. She increasingly valued the culture of her San Ildefonso Pueblo friends and neighbors as she laid aside her civilized life a little at a time. The Taos hippies sought freedom for themselves and for America, believing that they would spearhead an awakening from northern New Mexico. Like their predecessors, the Taos Artist's Society and Mabel Dodge Luhan, the communards fled from mainstream society

and found in Pueblo culture a possibility for healing a spiritually ill country. Their stories are not unique. Countless radical thinkers have turned to the West for freedom and rebirth and have sought to share their discoveries. And millions more have been attracted by their tales.

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## INTRODUCTION

The year was 1969. Two hippies mounted their motorcycles for a journey—a quest—through the Southwest. One of the riders, who called himself Captain America, looked at his watch, thought for a moment, and then threw it on the ground; he wanted to be free of time, not bound by obligations as he wandered. His bike, helmet, and jacket were decked out with the red, white, and blue of the American flag, colors which were supposed to symbolize “the land of the free.” Perhaps he was sounding a wake-up call. He rejected a materialistic society that harshly judged him for his vagabond lifestyle, while his friends were sent, against their will, to fight in an unjust war in Vietnam. He and his friend Billy, a nickname symbolizing outlaw Billy the Kid, began their journey on their iron horses, riding away from smoggy Los Angeles into the majestic landscape and solitude of the desert Southwest.<sup>1</sup>

The first half of *Easy Rider* depicts the two men exploring the wide-open desert. Brilliant colors fill the screen as they witness a breathtaking sunset at Monument Valley and journey through the Painted Desert. Captain America and Billy pulled over while driving through the dense pine forest outside Flagstaff to pick up a fellow freedom-seeker. Camping that evening, with their shadows dancing on the walls of crumbling Indian ruins in the campfire light, Billy asked his new friend, “Where you from, man?” The man responded, “Hard to say.” He was proud of his vagabond lifestyle, but joked,

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<sup>1</sup> *Easy Rider*, DVD, directed by Dennis Hopper (1969; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999).

“It’s hard to say because it’s a very long word, you know.” Eventually he acknowledged that he was from “a city.” Billy implored, “What city?” The nameless man responded, “doesn’t make any difference what city. All cities are alike. That’s why I’m out here now. I’m a long way from the city, and that’s where I wanna be right now.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the next day the three arrived at the nameless man’s destination, New Buffalo commune in northern New Mexico, where he and his fellow communards were attempting to create an alternative to mainstream American society.<sup>3</sup> They saw greed as a spiritual illness, and here, they hoped to free themselves from the disease. That evening, a shaggy-faced yet peaceful man named Jack said grace before their meal, “We have planted our seeds. We ask that our efforts be worthy to produce simple food for our simple taste. . . . We thank you for the food we eat from other hands that we may share it with our fellow man and be even more generous when it is from our own. Thank you for a place to make our stand.” They were making a stand against a spiritually bankrupt society, emulating Pueblo culture, sharing with their fellows, and living off the land with the stunning Sangre de Christo Mountains as a backdrop.<sup>4</sup>

A short while later, Captain America and Billy gave a ride to a lawyer named George Hanson, who did work for the American Civil Liberties Union. By the glow of a campfire, Hanson pondered freedom. “You know, this used to be a hell of a good country. I can’t understand what has gone wrong with it.” Billy contemplated his words,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> A commune is a mutually supportive community of people who share, to some degree, food, property, income, or labor, and often, ideals, in theory if not always in practice.

<sup>4</sup> *Easy Rider*.

listening to the crickets chirping in the background and finally responded, “Everybody got chicken, that’s what happened. We [hippies] can’t even get into a second rate motel, you dig. They think we’re gonna cut their throat. They’re scared man.” Hanson then replied, “They’re not scared of you. They’re scared of what you represent to ‘em.” Billy retorted, “Hey man, all we represent to them is somebody who needs a haircut.” Hanson countered, “Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom.” Billy exclaimed, “What the hell’s wrong with freedom? That’s what it’s all about.” Hanson swiftly acknowledged, “That’s right. That’s what it’s all about. But talking about and being it, that’s two different things. It’s real hard to be free when you’re bought and sold in the marketplace.” He paused. As Billy listened attentively, his face illuminated by the campfire, Hanson then advised, “‘Course, don’t ever tell anybody that they’re not free. ‘Cause then they’re gonna get real busy killin’ and maimin’ to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they gonna talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it’s gonna scare ‘em.” “Well, it don’t make ‘em runnin’ scared,” Billy pointed out. “No,” replied Hanson. “It makes ‘em dangerous.” Billy nodded his head slowly in thoughtful agreement.<sup>5</sup>

*Easy Rider* won best film by a new director at Cannes in 1969, it was nominated for an Academy award for best screenplay, and by 1972 it had grossed \$60 million on its \$400,000 investment.<sup>6</sup> Its theme was obviously in the minds of millions of Americans.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Box Office/Business for Easy Rider (1969)*  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0064276/business> (accessed 26 Oct. 2011); \$60 million in



The theme? When Peter Fonda pitched the concept of the movie to Dennis Hopper in 1967, he told him it was about two hippies trekking the American Southwest on motorcycles, he called it “the ultimate freedom.”<sup>7</sup> What is this ultimate freedom, I wondered? Where did this concept of finding freedom in the West come from, historically? Thus, this project was born. I began discussing these ideas with professors who urged me to keep digging, told me that I was onto something, and made suggestions. The rejection of mainstream society by white, middle class intellectuals and the embrace of a new, totally different life, a rebirth, in the West, coupled with a desire to share this new life through writing and artwork has been a radical yet persistent idea for a very long time.

*Easy Rider* portrayed the journey many of America’s youth made in the 1960s, searching for freedom. In this tumultuous era, thousands of hippies descended on New Buffalo and other communes throughout the Taos region.<sup>8</sup> But, the hippies were only the latest Americans to claim the West as a place of freedom and spiritual renewal. After further research, I discovered that predecessors of the hippies, the Taos Society of Artists

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1972 equals well over \$300 million in 2011 dollars: MeasuringWorth  
<http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php> (accessed 28 Jan. 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Easy Rider*.

<sup>8</sup> I use the word “hippies” because the majority of both scholars and my primary sources used that term. The word “hippie” was a media construction, and some of the subjects of this chapter called themselves “freaks,” or “longhairs,” others preferred “revolutionaries” or “counterculturalists.” Others did not want to be labeled at all. The most historically accurate term would be “1960s-1970s era Taos area counterculturalist communards,” which of course is exceedingly clunky. Most historians, as well as most former members, now accept the term “hippie,” albeit half-heartedly at times.

and Mabel Dodge Luhan, had planted those seeds in in northern New Mexico early in the twentieth century. Everett Ruess, a young artist-poet had wandered through the canyonlands of the West during the 1930s, documenting his spiritual conversion; Edith Warner had written of her spiritual transformation after she moved to New Mexico from Pennsylvania in 1928; and John Muir had undergone a spiritual awakening in the Sierra Nevada in the late 1860s. The search for freedom in the American West had a lengthy history and the experiences of these seekers shared common threads.

Four distinct, but overlapping, threads wove through the lives of these Americans over the course of many decades.<sup>9</sup> First, their actions and ideas seemed radical at the

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<sup>9</sup> The people I have chosen to examine used almost identical language to describe the “civilization” they were leaving, the “freedom” and the “spiritual connection” they felt with the natural world that each experienced after arriving in the western “wilderness,” despite the fact that they ventured to disparate parts of the “West” and came from dissimilar regions, diverse circumstances, and widely different time periods. Throughout my dissertation, I plan to interrogate the terminology used by the subjects of my case studies, to decipher their meanings, and to determine if and how those definitions changed over time. I will also examine the meanings of certain words such as “wilderness,” “civilization,” and “freedom,” and how those meanings changed among the people who used them. These words are slippery in their own right and I will take extra care to interpret how each person used these terms. Historian Roderick Nash, for example, observed that finding a definition of wilderness is elusive, noting, “One man’s wilderness may be another man’s picnic ground.” (Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1.) Psychologist and philosopher William James noted that mystical states are ineffable. (William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 333.) For thousands of years, people have unsuccessfully attempted to describe spiritual awakenings. Words have proven to be insufficient. Nonetheless, it is necessary as an historian to attempt to define key terms used by the subjects of this study. Additionally, I situate each subject into historical context. My work explores what each individual or group was escaping from and what were they running to—the push and pull factors—and how these factors evolved during the different eras. Did the differing push and pull factors and the different locations in the West have an impact on the outcome of each person’s journey? Class figures prominently in my study; for the most part, those who left “civilization” and found “freedom” and “spiritual connection”

time, especially by the middle class. They explored non-mainstream thought and dove into a freedom that few contemporary Americans shared, and the ideas of these seekers often became more radical over time.<sup>10</sup> Second, they all experienced some form of physical freedom that merged into psychological freedom. By choice, they rejected a comfortable, more urban, middle class lifestyle to embrace a more impoverished life of wandering or residing in regions that probably seemed like wilderness compared with their previous social environment. Their love of the natural world grew after their immersion there.<sup>11</sup> Third, their interactions with Native Americans gradually played an

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in the western “wilderness” and felt called to share their experiences with the masses were educated, privileged men and women (but primarily men) of European descent. Why? Specifically, I delve deeply into the lives and written words of John Muir, the Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan, Everett Ruess, Edith Warner, and the Taos communards.

<sup>10</sup> Radical or Non-mainstream thought are defined as out of the ordinary or different from the majority compared with others from their class standing during their respective eras. Certainly, choosing poverty over a middle class lifestyle was unusual for each time period yet each subject’s beliefs subsequently grew even more unconventional as my work will illustrate. Historian Lois Rudnick defines the term counterculturalist as an “oppositional stance taken by American reformers, radicals, writers, and artists who have contested the mainstream development of American society and culture—its rationalist bent, its class, gender, and ethnic differentiations and subordinations, and its corporate, imperialist, and materialist ethos.” (Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xiii.)

<sup>11</sup> The definition of “freedom” tended to evolve for the people in this study and I hope to arrive at a deeper understanding of this concept by the end of this research. They all believed the freedom they discovered was important enough that they sought to share their findings through their writing and artwork. I will attempt to decipher what they wanted us to know. Typically, freedom meant simply the escape from the burdens of middle class life. They enjoyed the solitude and ability to wander without duty or obligation. For each, though, freedom evolved into something more psychological and spiritual after immersion in the natural world. They spoke of a “spiritual connection” with the environment, feeling divinity, a knowing that they were in the presence of the

increasingly important role in their lives.<sup>12</sup> Fourth, they all wrote about having had a spiritual awakening in the natural world, and many created artwork, hoping to share their experiences with others so that they might follow a similar path.<sup>13</sup>

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divine, and they often began to capitalize words such as “Beauty” and “Nature.” They felt less concerned with the opinions of others. They began to equate freedom as the opposite of civilization. They viewed civilization as the way the majority of Americans lived. They spoke of pollution and greed as illnesses associated with civilization. Perhaps, the embrace of poverty could be tied to this.

<sup>12</sup> Relationships with Native Americans grew increasingly important to the subjects of this research. Indians were eventually seen as the opposite of, or antidote for, civilization, and their spirituality and relationship with the land became significant for the later seekers. This is a complicated topic and one that I am well versed in—academically and also through personal experience. I explore the relationships between the subjects of this study and the Native people with whom they interacted. The subjects of this study had different relationships with a variety of tribes. There is a great deal written about how Indians often stand in for whites as the opposite of civilization. I engage with the literature on this in the dissertation, including works such as Flannery Burke’s *From Greenwich to Taos*, Margaret Jacobs’ *Engendered Encounters*, and Sherry Smith’s *Reimagining Indians*.

<sup>13</sup> For spirituality or spiritual experience or mystical states which each of the subjects of this study experienced, as I shall prove in the following chapters, I will use William James’ definition of mystical states, which includes four distinct properties. “. . . What does the expression “mystical states of consciousness” mean?” James asks, “How do we part off mystical states from other states?”

. . . I will . . . simply propose to you four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical . . .

1. *Ineffability*.-- . . . The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. . . .
2. *Noetic quality*. -- Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are

Building on my Master of Arts thesis, this dissertation explores the rhetoric of spiritual freedom in the United States West. An exercise in intellectual and cultural history, this study explores the lives of individuals and groups who journeyed to the American West in search of “freedom.”<sup>14</sup> It seeks to resolve this puzzle: Why did these figures of the American middle class, who already lived the American Dream, walk away

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illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. . . .

3. *Transiency*. -- Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.
4. *Passivity*. -- Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. . . . Mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence. . . .” (James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 332-34.)

William James also noted, “Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods.” (Ibid., 345.)

<sup>14</sup> The West, for the purpose of this work, will be defined as both a region, and as an idea or concept, but not necessarily as a direction. Many individuals or groups considered in this dissertation moved directionally to the west but they were heading to an actual region, which shifted over time. Therefore, the idea of the West is also significant. Those who mythologize the West as a place of rebirth and renewal may never travel to the area. Some of the people considered in this work travelled east (from California) to arrive in the West. “What is the West?” is a fascinating question I explore further in the following pages.

from their position? If they truly had mystical experiences, reached higher states of consciousness, and felt called to write about them, perhaps their stories offer further understanding of American society between the mid-nineteenth century and the late-twentieth century.

I take an interdisciplinary approach throughout this study, in an attempt to blur the lines between academic disciplines; history, much like life, does not fit neatly into little boxes. This work permeates boundaries and draws upon philosophy, art history, religious studies, American studies, psychology, and sociology, while still adhering to the tenets expected of academic history.

In the Western setting, with its diverse yet distinctively stunning terrain, the individuals included in my study asserted that their mind or soul—not just their physical body—had been liberated. They felt reborn. Although historians have frequently spotlighted economic opportunity as a primary motivation for migration into the West, they have often ignored the fact that it was not just “free land” or financial prospects but spiritual and psychological freedom and rebirth, that attracted many to the West’s wide open spaces.<sup>15</sup> Historians have thus overlooked the significance of the lives of numerous individuals and groups. This dissertation complicates the discussion of immigration into the West because it illustrates how the West attracted Americans seeking freedom in the solitude of the Pacific Coast mountain ranges, the Southwestern desert canyon country, and the Sangre de Christos and the Pajarito Plateau of northern New Mexico. My work

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<sup>15</sup> However, Eric Foner and other historians of free labor have certainly addressed the wider definition and ideas of freedom represented by the West. This dissertation considers these conceptualizations and directly dialogues with those works.

adds to the scholarly conversation by exploring key questions. Historically, why have countless radical thinkers turned to the West for freedom and rebirth?<sup>16</sup> Why did these seekers insist on sharing their discoveries? Further, why have millions of Americans been attracted by their tales?

The lives and experiences of John Muir, the Taos Artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Everett Ruess, Edith Warner, Jack Kerouac, and the Taos communards elucidate a recurring theme in American history: rejection of mainstream American society and search for a new world in the West, one that offered an opportunity for rebirth.<sup>17</sup> The stories of these seekers are not unique: Charles Fletcher Lummis, Mary Austin, Woody Guthrie, Edward Abbey, and many others probed the West through similar quests for freedom and meaning—[most found their treasure]. Their stories are ultimately about freedom. The subjects of this study sought freedom for themselves; most of them chose to share their discoveries with others through their writing or their artwork. Even today, people are still drawn to the words and lives of these men and women.

The concept of freedom has a variety of meanings—economic, social, political, and spiritual—but I argue freedom ultimately is about liberty, free will, and choice. For many, the West seemed to embody the freedom they sought for themselves and their families, and it lured them into its space with its promise of liberation. Many seekers

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<sup>16</sup> This dissertation explores why the West, specifically, has attracted a particular type of seeker. It looks into the myth of the West as a place of freedom and rebirth and delves into historical memory. It examines why the West has become mythologized in film, for example, and why other areas such as upstate New York (which has been known for its radical religious developments and certainly has stunning landscapes), have not.

<sup>17</sup> By “mainstream American Society,” I mean the conventional, accepted, or traditional lifestyle that a majority of the Euroamerican middle class expected of one of its members.

who journeyed west failed to find the freedom they sought, but most immigrants discovered it in some form, and often, they discovered something hidden within themselves. Some, like George Hanson in *Easy Rider*, might argue that all people are drawn to freedom, but few are brave enough to truly experience it. The people whose stories I tell here all chose to follow their own path and discover their own truths, regardless of how radical these truths might have appeared to mainstream America.

*They modeled freedom as few others have.* These men and women found physical, social, psychological, and spiritual freedom in a majestic western landscape. After stripping away the layers of opinions and societal beliefs, they liberated their minds and souls in the brilliant landscape of the American West. They discovered courage, identity, spirituality, and, above all, freedom. These radical Americans liberated themselves by discarding beliefs handed down by the middle class and finding a profound spiritual relationship with nature. They created their own paths up a metaphorical mountain and discovered their own truths, disregarding condemnation from family, friends, and people who often wondered why they could not be more practical. The American West provided the ideal setting for these physical and spiritual journeys. The region's unique terrain has encouraged this possibility—lustrous landscapes, rugged mountains, endless forests, and the vast sky often changed people's perspectives.

The seekers discussed in the following pages originally sought freedom from the demands of the middle class, yet after they immersed themselves in western landscapes, they came to understand freedom through a spiritual perspective. Since the founding of the United States, the American West has proved to be a potent region of the continent



where individuals could experience freedom and, perhaps, even rebirth. The land and landscape of the West has significantly altered, indeed awakened, many outsiders who ventured into the region. The red-rock sandstone of infinite hues, oddly-shaped hoodoos, spacious desert land, and desolate canyons and valleys altered previous viewpoints. Repeatedly, individuals searching for freedom in the solitude of these landscapes have discovered a spiritual connection with the natural world. In the words of J.R.R. Tolkien “Not all who wander are lost.”<sup>18</sup> Author Wallace Stegner noted that, “being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led West.”<sup>19</sup> The Mormons, too, tell us the West is a place of religious freedom. Brigham Young led his people in a latter-day Exodus away from his Midwestern persecutors to the Promised Land in Utah’s Wasatch Valley in 1847.<sup>20</sup> Seekers of religious freedom have also followed this path into the West.

The American West, today, conjures images of freedom. The tourist industry promotes the region as a place of escape from the fast pace of mainstream society, inviting visitors to experience adventure in “the Old West.” Automobile manufacturers, too, have extended the same message by offering images of visitors roving in four-wheel

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<sup>18</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954).

<sup>19</sup> Wallace Earle Stegner, *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 22; also quoted in Art Linson, et al., *Into the wild* (Hollywood, Calif: Paramount, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The story of A New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 122.

drive vehicles through the solitude of Monument Valley or perched on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Harley Davidson invites us to “experience the freedom of the open road” as its riders zoom through red-rock western landscapes. The lure of the West maintains its persuasive appeal.

## Historiography of Themes

### Historiography—Radical thought

Historian Lois Rudnick discusses radical, non-mainstream thought in the U.S. West as she expertly documents the history of the Mabel Dodge Luhan house from its construction in 1918, through its hippie commune days, and into the present in *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture*. She explains that the house served as a microcosm of the history of American and European radicals and visionaries who sought to heal wounds inflicted by industrialization and modernity.<sup>21</sup> And yet her scope was narrow. She focused on one particular house, rather than the entire region. My work builds on some of Rudnick’s themes, expanding the scope to a larger area of the West and over a longer time-period.

### Historiography—Physical freedom becoming psychological freedom

Frederick Jackson Turner first imagined the West as a place of freedom—academically speaking—in his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” He argued that the frontier and the onward march of American civilization

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<sup>21</sup> Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xiii.

created America's identity and that freedom was a key characteristic of that identity.<sup>22</sup>

Turner contended that the West and its "free land," that is "unclaimed land," created America's distinctive characteristics, including individualism and restless mobility.<sup>23</sup> I expand upon the spiritual qualities of freedom felt by individuals submerging themselves in Western landscapes.

In *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick argues that conquest involved, fundamentally, a search for economic freedom that led to a battle for cultural dominance, which also "involved a struggle over languages, cultures, and religions; the pursuit of legitimacy in property overlapped with the pursuit of legitimacy in way of life and point of view."<sup>24</sup> Like Turner, Limerick argues that the experiences of the West were of paramount importance for the nation, although for different reasons. "Conquest," Limerick explains, "was a literal, territorial form of economic growth. Westward expansion was the most concrete, down-to-earth demonstration of the economic habit on which the entire nation became dependent."<sup>25</sup> She asserts that, "Many American people have held to a strong faith that humans can master the world—of nature and of humans—

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<sup>22</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," In *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894), 199-200.

<sup>23</sup> Turner overlooked the fact that the land was not "free," unclaimed, and uninhabited; indigenous groups, of course, had resided throughout the frontier region for millennia.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

around them, and Western America has put that faith to one of its most revealing tests.”<sup>26</sup> Americans moving to the West for economic freedom greatly harmed the Indigenous people of the region. Limerick suggests the “Remoteness from... Washington, D.C.” and a lack of a strong dominant government as factors contributing to the unique set of circumstances in the West.<sup>27</sup> This last point cries out for more research and this dissertation project adds depth to the discussion. Limerick, like Turner, focused on economic freedom as the impetus for individuals and groups to make the journey to the West. I further develop the ideas of the spiritual and psychological freedom sought and experienced by many people who travelled to the region and immersed themselves in the Western terrain.

This dissertation also dialogues with Roderick Nash’s seminal work of U.S. West intellectual history, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.<sup>28</sup> Nash explores the concept of wilderness in the United States and how Americans have viewed and interacted with wilderness. Nash frames his discussion by tracing the history of the environmental movement, although he explores the roots of the conception of wilderness in Biblical times and earlier. Ultimately, Nash argues, Wilderness is a state of mind.<sup>29</sup> Although he

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>28</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1967.

<sup>29</sup> Robert G. Athearn’s *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1986) noted that during the 1920s, for many Americans, the American West took on a mythical status. Since the days of mountain men and explorers, stories of a stunning natural world and an abundance of free land and natural resources there for the taking had fueled the myth of the West. (249-50) The myth of the

touches on some of the themes I discuss, and even explores the life of John Muir, his focus is quite different. Nash investigates the concept of “wilderness” in the imagination of Americans, while my work focuses on the rhetoric of “freedom” experienced by middle class men and women who left more urbanized areas to explore areas they spoke of as wilderness. Although there is some overlap and my work builds on some of his themes, the differences remain vast. His work, however, serves as a model of a well-written intellectual history and I expand and expound upon some of his ideas.<sup>30</sup>

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Old West is about freedom. According to the legend, when everyday people relocated to this extraordinary region, they were reborn and their lives changed dramatically. (273) The West has meant refuge, opportunity, renewal, hope, escape, and freedom. (274-75) The region stood far from the influences of civilization and, in theory, brought people back to an ancient, simpler, more authentic way of life. (6) The myth of freedom and adventure in the American West continued to persist, Athearn explained, for three basic reasons: a growing desire among urban Americans to get back in touch with the natural world; a strong yearning for individuality in an increasingly constrictive society; and a longing for a simpler, more primitive lifestyle in the face of rapid industrialization and greater governmental control. (272) I argue, expanding on his ideas, that the myth also persisted because the lives of men and women like John Muir, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Edith Warner, Everett Ruess, Jack Kerouac, and the Taos hippies reflected these experiences. Tales and legends, real or imagined, helped to recreate the dream of the frontier (and the freedom to be found there) in people’s imaginations. (1) Athearn, however, focused primarily on the West of the mind (of Easterners) rather than the real West and people’s actual experiences there, which I explore in more detail. He argued that the West ran short of resources and growing room; yet the myth remained alive. But I contend that people continued to find freedom and a spiritual connection with nature in the West despite modernization and the changes in the region. I more fully explore the creation of the myth and the reasons for its persistence, pulling the argument further into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>30</sup> William H. and William N. Goetzmann in *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) explain that artists and photographers created vivid and romantic images of frontier life that helped shape a mythic and imaginative notion in the American mind. Like Athearn, they accomplished their goal but they concentrated on the West in people’s minds and did not fully explore the actual lives of people who were changed by the West as I do with this dissertation. The physicality and spirituality of experiencing the West was part of the creation of its idea.

Julie R. Jeffrey explores freedom in the West in *Frontier Women*, although she focuses specifically on women's pioneer experiences during the frontier period. She agrees with Turner and Athearn that Americans were drawn toward the western frontier from the outset, "with its promise of adventure and the opportunities it held out for land, health, gold, and religious freedom." Jeffrey, like the others, chiefly spotlights economic aspects of freedom in the West and does not highlight the spiritual transformations that occurred.<sup>31</sup>

#### Historiography—Native Americans

Sherry Lynn Smith, in *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans Through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940*, notes that writers like Walter McClintock, George Bird Grinnell, and Mabel Dodge Luhan turned to Native Americans in the West in search of freedom.<sup>32</sup> These writers, "sought to find *themselves* through immersion in an alien yet attractive culture."<sup>33</sup> They maintained that they did find themselves, and found spiritual rebirth or renewal through Indian people and culture. American Indians in the West, according to them, "offered solace from crass, coarse, contemporary American life."<sup>34</sup> These writers entered the West after their teenage years and the open spaces, beautiful natural wonders, and unique Indian cultures provided a positive contrast to mainstream industrial

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<sup>31</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880* (1979; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Sherry Lynn Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans Through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

American society they had left behind.<sup>35</sup> The perception of American Indians was changing throughout America, partly due to these authors, as, “doubts about capitalism, competitive individualism, and materialism grew. . .”<sup>36</sup> These writers found in the West and in Indian cultures, “a refuge from the world they inhabited but wanted to flee.” They sought freedom not only for themselves, they also hoped to, “alter aspects of modern American life they found distasteful, rather than simply escape them.” Antimodernists also found a, “life of religious and spiritual meaning. . .”<sup>37</sup> In their grandest dreams, the antimodernists wanted to free America by modeling a new society on the Pueblos of the Southwest. They had impressive, yet unrealistic, goals, “Increased awareness of the Pueblos’ spiritual and artistic richness along with dedication to perpetuating their way of life would, in the end, save not only Indians but also all of America. Regeneration of individual tribe, country, and even world depended on commitment to such goals.”<sup>38</sup> Smith’s scope, however, was narrower than mine. I trace these themes from the 1860s through the 1970s. The hippies who descended upon Taos actually sought to create a society modeled on Pueblo culture that the subjects of Smith’s study only imagined. I also juxtapose her ideas by comparing the philosophy of some of her subjects with the notions of John Muir who spoke in similar language yet attributed his ideas solely to his wanderings in the wilderness, not to Native American culture.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 215-216.

Philip Deloria explores Indian-White relations in *Playing Indian*.<sup>39</sup> Americans define themselves in relation to Indians, according to Deloria. Although this relationship has evolved and shifted, non-native Americans have often simultaneously rejected and embraced American Indians—craving both the civilized and the savage. My work expands on Deloria’s ideas as I explore the evolution of thoughts about Indigenous people held by the subjects of my study. I delve into the tradition of homogenized American Indians embodying the antithesis of civilization for whites. Eventually, however, most of the subjects of this study came to understand and appreciate the differences among tribes as well as the individuality of their members.

Although these authors have achieved their goals, and their works have greatly contributed to my understanding of freedom in the West, they address broader or more limited topics and time periods. My work adds to the conversation because it illustrates how the West attracted Americans who found freedom in the mountains, the desert canyon country, or the foothills of northern New Mexico. Although economic opportunity in the form of gold, timber, ranching, homesteads, and land speculation was certainly important, people often ventured to the West for other reasons.<sup>40</sup> I argue that for some, the idea of freedom itself, not “free land” but the spiritual and psychological freedoms that came with the West’s geographical features, were the driving force—the inspiration—for their journeys.

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> I explore whether economic freedom needs to be starkly separated from spiritual and psychological freedom, and if so, how issues of class play into the differing definitions of freedom. The role of class plays an important part of this study.



Chapter one reveals that John Muir's liberated wandering through the mighty Sierra Nevada wilderness led to a spiritual awakening. His authoritarian father left him craving physical and spiritual freedom. Although he wandered through the South for several months, he discovered the freedom he sought in the awe-inspiring Sierra Nevada. In the Sierras, he learned that physical and spiritual freedoms were closely entwined.

Chapter two investigates the Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan, who helped create the idea of the West as a haven for countercultural visionaries in the American consciousness. The rugged terrain, coupled with the people of the Pueblo of Taos and their rich history and spiritual practices captured the respect of the artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan herself. Although they romantically idealized the region and its people, they successfully spread the myth of the West throughout the country.

Chapter three explores how Everett Ruess experienced physical, social, and spiritual freedom as he drifted across the desert Southwest on his search for enlightenment. Although Ruess was not unique in his quest, he articulated his ideas better than most and left us a vast amount of written material documenting his pursuit of awakening. His connection with the rural Southwest grew deeper as he gained a sense of freedom; his philosophical spiritual feelings intensified as he found solitude to be the cure for the ills of civilization.

Chapter four describes Edith Warner's conversion within the sparsely populated region northwest of Santa Fe. Although northern New Mexico seemed like another world compared with the life she had known in Pennsylvania, she immediately embraced the

land and her Indian neighbors of the Pueblo of San Ildefonso. She documented her transformation in letters, essays, and journals.

Chapter five focuses on the hippies who travelled to the Rio Grande del Norte region of northern New Mexico in search of freedom and authenticity for themselves and, possibly for all of America. Believing that the region would be the focal point of a great awakening, the communards, like their predecessors, the Taos Artist's Society and Mabel Dodge Luhan, sought escape from mainstream society and attempted to create a model for healing a spiritually sick nation. Many found personal salvation in the Native American Church.

I explore the differences, and more importantly, the similarities among these diverse individuals and groups, examining the parallels and divergence in their language usage, placing each within a historical context, while paying particular attention to the evolution of ideas.<sup>41</sup> For example, admiration of Native Americans and their cultures consistently increased from decade to decade during these years. John Muir rarely mentioned Native Americans and the little he did write about them could easily be viewed as racist by today's standards; Muir was interested only in the wilderness. Most of the Taos artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan held a highly romantic view of the region's native inhabitants. Everett Ruess also held a romantic notion of Indigenous people and cultures as he came to know and admire them, although to a lesser degree. Through her link with San Ildefonso people, Edith Warner held a more grounded view of American

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<sup>41</sup> In the following pages, I delve into western ideas of beauty and the sublime including an in-depth discussion of the Luminist school of painters. I also discuss how deserts were not always considered beautiful by bringing in ideas of Roderick Nash, Donald Worster, and the Bible.

Indians than Ruess. The hippies who relocated to Taos sought to model a new society based upon the culture and values of the Pueblo of Taos.

The people discussed in the following pages knew they had an important message to share. After shunning the conformity of mainstream urban society, they discovered a spiritual connection with the land. After they discarded their mechanized existence, they awakened in nature. Each of them advised America that our society's current evolution was leading us away from nature—which they came to equate with God. They also argued that society had a spiritual illness that could be cured.

## CHAPTER I

### JOHN MUIR: LIBERATION AND AWAKENING IN THE SIERRAS

In 1867, John Muir, a young Scottish American who lived in Wisconsin, took a job as a machinist working in a carriage shop. Only two months passed before he suffered an accident that would change his life. “A serious accident hurried me away sooner than I had planned. I had put in a countershaft for a new circular saw,” Muir explained, “and [it] had to be shortened.” He then began “making use of the nail-like end of a file to draw out the stitches, it slipped and pierced my right eye.” He was shocked at first, but when that had passed, he recalled, “I closed my eye, and when I lifted the lid of the injured one, the aqueous humor dripped on my hand, the sight gradually failed and in a few minutes came perfect darkness. ‘My right eye is gone,’ I murmured, ‘closed forever on all God’s beauty.’” The accident terrified the young man. “In a few hours,” he recollected, “the shock sent me trembling to bed and very soon by sympathy the other eye became blind, so that I was in total darkness and feared that I would become permanently blind.”<sup>1</sup>

The Scottish immigrant soon discovered his purpose and the burning desire to pursue it. While imagining the splendor of Yosemite, he bargained with God that if his eyesight were to return he would spend the rest of his life studying the beauty of God’s inventions. His vision recovered after a few months, and inspired with a new sense of

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<sup>1</sup> John Muir, *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, ed. William Frederic Badè (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 153-54.

purpose, he decided to wander, vowing to follow through with his promise. Although Muir was offered a partnership in the company he was working for, he turned it down in order to pursue his destiny. “As soon as I got out into Heaven's light,” he explained, he started on a “long excursion, making haste with all my heart to store my mind with the Lord's beauty and thus be ready for any fate, light or dark.” He joked with a friend that God had to almost take his life before he would listen. Muir had learned God’s lesson well. “It was from this time that my long continuous wanderings may be said to have fairly commenced,” he explained. “I bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God.” He embarked on a thousand mile hike to the Gulf of Mexico, to explore the natural world and follow through with his pledge.<sup>2</sup>

A few months later, the Sierra Nevada wilderness rewarded Muir with a spiritual awakening. “Never shall I forget my baptism in this font,” he recalled. Feeling reborn, he observed that it was “a resurrection day for many a plant and for me.”<sup>3</sup> His writing, steeped in religious imagery, drew from ideas of the sublime, reflecting the influence of nineteenth century Transcendentalism. According to that philosophy, the godhead could be found in a shaft of sunlight, a majestic mountain peak, or a tumultuous river; in sublime and luminist paintings, light was associated with divinity.<sup>4</sup> In observing the hills

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 154-55.

<sup>3</sup> John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, ed. William Frederic Badè (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 211

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 41-43.

of the Sierra Nevada, bathed in light, Muir wrote, “The ground steamed with fragrance. Light, of unspeakable richness, was brooding the flowers. Truly, said I, is California the Golden State -- in metallic gold, in sun gold.”<sup>5</sup> He gazed out at the distant mighty Sierra peaks covered in bands of purple, blue, and white hues and felt their spiritual power as if they were nearby guardian angels. Then, he felt divinity in the shafts of sunlight. “You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire,” he explained. “Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature.”<sup>6</sup> Muir linked his spiritual awakening with his growing sense of liberation. Blending with the landscape and losing consciousness of his separate existence was, to him, freedom. Time no longer had meaning; he felt eternal. “Another glorious Sierra day,” he wrote shortly after his arrival, “in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality.”<sup>7</sup> The powerful beauty of the Western mountain landscape helped Muir experience complete freedom, spiritually as well as physically.

Many biographers have written about John Muir and his life, including Stephen Fox, in *John Muir and His Legacy: the American Conservation Movement*, and Robert W. Righter, in *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the*

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<sup>5</sup> Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk*, ed. William Frederic Badè, 211

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

*Birth of Modern Environmentalism*. These biographies, although excellent scholarly works, have focused on Muir's fight to protect wilderness areas, not on his freedom and spiritual awakening. John P. O'Grady, in *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin*, concentrates on Muir's sensory experience of the wilderness rather than on his spiritual awakening. Roderick Nash focuses on John Muir as a publicist of the American wilderness in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Mark Stoll, in "God and John Muir: A Psychological Interpretation of John Muir's Journey," in *John Muir: Life and Work*, focuses on the psychological relationship between John Muir and his father, Daniel. Stoll does not describe Muir's awakening or link it with Muir's physical freedom, as this chapter does. In *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*, Donald Worster concentrates on how Muir joined the fight for liberal principles, a battle that spread around the globe.<sup>8</sup> While most of these writers describe Muir's religious imagery, no author has fully explored John Muir's awakening in California, linking it with his physical freedom.

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: the American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981); Robert W. Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); John P. O'Grady, *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Mark R. Stoll, "God and John Muir: A Psychological Interpretation of John Muir's Journey from the Campbellites to the 'Range of Light,'" in *John Muir: Life and Work*, ed. Sally M. Miller (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Similarly, also see: Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness; The Life of John Muir* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1945); Thurman Wilkins, *John Muir: Apostle of Nature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

Michael P. Cohen, in *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*, does explore Muir's spiritual awakening but Cohen describes it as more Buddhist in nature; also he pinpoints Muir's moment of enlightenment later than this chapter posits; and Cohen misses Muir's emphasis on physical freedom. Nor does Cohen explain the early development of Muir's spiritual awakening during his journey through the Deep South. Cohen likened John Muir to a Taoist or a Buddhist, although it is unlikely that Muir considered himself either of these; it is unclear whether he had studied eastern religion or philosophy. Muir did urge others to take the inward journey that Buddhism preaches. For example, soon after his arrival in the Sierra, he wrote, "I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."<sup>9</sup> Zen Buddhism, which was strongly influenced by Taoism, teaches that spending time in nature "can help us reconnect with that part of ourselves whose wisdom lies beyond words."<sup>10</sup> By going out and going in Muir discovered himself, the Universe, and God. His statement sounds remarkably similar to the ideas expressed by Thoreau, who was definitely influenced by Eastern religions, namely Hinduism; he refers to Hindu texts in his writings. Muir was more likely influenced by Thoreau than by Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911; reprint, Atlanta: Norman S. Berg, 1972), 73.

<sup>10</sup> David Fontana, *Discover Zen: A Practical Guide to Personal Serenity* (San Francisco: Chronicle books, 2001), 18, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and the American Wilderness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).



This chapter's interpretation of John Muir's history offers a new interpretation of Muir's life and our larger understanding of the nexus of sublime western landscapes and notions of freedom. As twenty-first century Americans are increasingly drawn to nature due to the overwhelming expansion of urban and suburban life, perhaps the words of our predecessors can offer us a deeper understanding of ourselves, individually and as a culture.<sup>12</sup> Muir's journey began with a promise to God to spend the rest of his life appreciating the splendor of creation, and he put his fate in God's hands, uncertain where his journey would lead. His upbringing by an oppressive father made him crave physical and spiritual freedom intensely. He became unfettered during his journey. These feelings began as he traveled through the Deep South, although he still felt uneasy, having discarded much of his father's religion without yet having a fully formed philosophy to replace it. His feelings of absolute freedom and spiritual awakening reached a climax as he baptized himself in the Sierra sunbeams while gazing at the California landscape. His awakening, although similar to that of the New England Transcendentalists, linked physical and spiritual freedom, and also fused it with science, specifically botany. Muir had an epiphany that physical and spiritual freedom were intimately coupled.

John Muir's writings are replete with religious imagery. Well versed in Transcendentalist literature and ideas, he wrote in a style that echoed Thoreau. Muir's philosophy was a conglomeration of ideas that melded his obsessively religious,

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Worster, "John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature," *Environmental History* (January 2005): 8.

Biblically-literal, Protestant upbringing with Transcendentalist writings, botany, and his physical immersion in the natural world.<sup>13</sup>

The freedom Muir experienced in the Sierras grew out of what he viewed as an imprisoned youth. Although he eventually rejected much of his father's religious teachings, he remained deeply spiritual. John Muir was born along the North Sea in the Lowlands of Scotland on April 21, 1838. Daniel Muir, John Muir's father, taught the boy an abrasive style of Christianity, forcing him to memorize Bible verses and hymns along with his schoolwork.<sup>14</sup> By age eleven, when he and his family moved from Scotland to Wisconsin, John Muir had memorized most of the Old Testament and "all of the New by heart and by sore flesh." Christianity was beaten into him, literally. The boy could recite almost the entire New Testament without stopping.<sup>15</sup> Muir had conflicting feelings about his father, who constantly thought and spoke in Biblical terms. He seemed "very hard-

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<sup>13</sup> Ferenc Szasz observed that John Muir's father, Daniel, left the Calvinist and Presbyterian based Church of Scotland to join the Disciples of Christ in 1848. The family migrated to the United States following Daniel Muir's conversion, where he joined the Campbellites. John Muir may not have formed his beliefs about nature as a reaction against his father's "dour Calvinism" but as an expansion of his father's later beliefs; Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 66-67. John Muir certainly deviated from his father's Biblical literalism beliefs and felt that his father was overly-authoritarian in general, however, Muir continued to write using Biblical language and several aspects from beliefs held by Disciples of Christ remain evident throughout John Muir's life. The teachings he grew up with shaped the way he perceived the wilderness although he transformed many aspects of these beliefs, often applying them to nature rather than to God or the Bible.

<sup>14</sup> John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1912; reprint, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

hearted, while naturally his heart was far from hard, though he devoutly believed in eternal punishment for bad boys both here and hereafter.”<sup>16</sup> Muir wrote that he, like other Scottish children, “were taught grim self-denial . . . to mortify the flesh, keep our bodies in subjection to Bible laws, and mercilessly punish ourselves for every fault imagined or committed.”<sup>17</sup> The young boy never fully accepted his father’s ideas. When his father warned the boy of the terrors awaiting him in hell for his bad behavior, Muir thought himself such a good climber that he could just climb out of hell if he were cast in. Fear of hell never lasted very long, he wrote, “for natural faith casts out fear.”<sup>18</sup> These experiences led Muir to long for the idea of a more loving God.

Muir’s father often beat him, physically and verbally, sometimes as punishment for transgressions like fighting and sometimes for no reason at all. The boy and his brother sought refuge in the woods. “Wildness was ever sounding in our ears,” he wrote, “and Nature saw to it that besides school lessons and church lessons some of her own lessons should be learned, perhaps with a view to the time when we should be called to wander in wildness to our heart’s content. . . . We were glorious, we were free,--school cares and scoldings, heart thrashings and flesh thrashings alike, were forgotten in the fullness of Nature’s glad wildness.”<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, in his hometown of Dunbar, “by the stormy North Sea, there was no lack of wildness.” He grew fonder of wild places and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

wild animals every year.<sup>20</sup> During his youth in rural Lothian, he began to learn directly from nature at a young age, and the woods and meadows became intimately associated with his idea of freedom.

Muir was first attracted to the American wilderness before the family emigrated. While reading a book by a fellow Scot, ornithologist Alexander Wilson, who had spent time wandering and exploring the American woods, he found narrative of the landscape and its wild creatures fascinating.<sup>21</sup> One evening, Muir's father surprised his sons with the news that they were leaving for America the next morning. Muir thought with anticipation, "No more grammar, but boundless woods full of mysterious good things; trees full of sugar, growing in ground full of gold; hawks, eagles, pigeons, filling the sky; millions of birds' nests, and no gamekeepers to stop us in all the wild, happy land. We were utterly, blindly glorious."<sup>22</sup> In 1849, at age eleven, Muir felt liberated as he embraced the unknown and sailed with his family from Scotland to the American wilderness.<sup>23</sup>

John Muir found a sense of freedom in nature and began creating his own personal philosophy at a young age; on the family farm in Wisconsin Muir began to blossom into a naturalist. In his teens, he enjoyed escaping his house for periods of time, "this sudden splash into pure wildness—baptism in Nature's warm heart—how utterly

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>21</sup> Muir does not distinguish where Wilson explored in the American wilderness.

<sup>22</sup> Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 43-45.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us . . . every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us.”<sup>24</sup> On Sundays, after studying his Bible lessons, he went to hear sermons from nature. “In particular we took Christ's advice and devoutly ‘considered the lilies’--how they grow up in beauty out of gray lime mud, and ride gloriously among the breezy sun-spangles.”<sup>25</sup> Taking Christ’s recommendation, Muir began learning directly from the plants and animals. He was beginning to look at the earth in spiritual terms. While he was learning a strict evangelical Christianity from his father, he was forming his own ideas about spirituality that would prove to be very different from his father’s teachings.

The laborious years in Wisconsin led Muir to thirst for even greater freedom. His father put him to work on the new farm, which began with clearing of the fields. Muir toiled through every season. The only days he enjoyed any freedom were New Year’s Day, the Fourth of July, and on Sundays after church.<sup>26</sup> Otherwise, he labored through an exhausting seventeen-hour day.<sup>27</sup> At times, he felt as though he were a slave and undoubtedly longed for liberation. When possible, he and his brother would meander through the forests and fields. In escaping his father’s iron grip and exploring the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

Wisconsin woods, Muir began observing and falling in love with the natural world. His first experiences with freedom left him thirsting for more.

During his teenage years, Muir managed to avoid some of the harshness of his life by rising early in the morning, when he fashioned an unusual array of mechanical inventions, wandering in the wilderness when the opportunity presented itself, and reading voraciously. He had to be careful to hide any non-religious books from his father, who maintained that the Bible was the only book humans needed.<sup>28</sup> By the time Muir was fifteen, he was reading literature, especially books of poetry written by a wide range of writers. When his father insisted that he turn off all lights at a specific time at night, yet permitted waking at any hour, Muir proceeded to wake up at 1:00 a.m. every morning and used the free time for inventing and reading.<sup>29</sup>

Through his reading Muir introduced himself to the Transcendentalists, who influenced his later description of the wild. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other New England Transcendentalist writers echoed the stance of earlier philosophers, such as Plato and Kant, who believed in a higher plane of reality. Transcendentalism connected the lower sphere of the material world and a higher sphere of spiritual truth. According to the Transcendentalists, the natural world reflected universal spiritual truths. Emerson wrote in 1836 that the natural world is a symbol of the spirit, that the world is emblematic of divinity. The physical body embedded humans in the physical realm, while the soul gave one the ability to *transcend* the physical and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 192, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 199.

connect with the spiritual. Transcendentalists believed that humans, by using intuition and imagination rather than rational knowledge, could gain access to spiritual truths, come into contact with divinity, and move towards a higher level of morality. They stressed that all human beings possessed this ability, even though few pursued this path. The Transcendentalists agreed with the eighteenth century deists that divinity was present in nature and that the natural world was the correct foundation of religion, but they rejected the deists' devotion to the power of reason. Their philosophy was more in line with the Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, who believed that moral forces could be felt in the natural world. At the same time, Transcendentalists took issue with their Puritan predecessors' Calvinist idea of man as inherently evil; instead, they argued that a spark of divinity existed in each individual, and that people were basically good. Further, they believed that spending time in nature could lead towards moral improvement.<sup>30</sup> Muir's writing is steeped in transcendental thought; the ideas proposed by Thoreau are especially evident in Muir's work.

Thoreau, in particular, held the natural world in high esteem. He valued nature, in part, because of his discontent with the greed-driven, frenzied pace of Western civilization. He also praised the solitude of the natural world, which permitted self-

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<sup>30</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 84-85; background reading on Transcendentalism also included William E. Cain, *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Donald Koster, *Transcendentalism in America* (Boston: Twayne, 1975); Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

examination, and served a source of inspiration and vitality.<sup>31</sup> Thoreau saw in nature “some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him.”<sup>32</sup> For Thoreau, the essential wild area lay within, and, since the natural world had an uplifting impact upon thought, it tamed the wild within. Going outward to nature, exploring and observing it, for Thoreau, led to an inward journey. Freedom and solitude could be found in nature because it allowed one to strip away social conditioning and get down to the essentials.<sup>33</sup> Although Muir is often remembered as a protector of the wild, he also realized that its true value lay in leading one to an inward journey. The natural world, according to Thoreau, helped “settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion . . . through Paris and London, through New York, and Boston . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call *reality*.”<sup>34</sup> Nature gave humans the opportunity to strip away the layers of beliefs thrust upon them by outside influences. Poets and philosophers best appreciated the natural world, Thoreau maintained; most people missed the spiritual value of the nature because they focused on the material and physical, “For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand

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<sup>31</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 86-88.

<sup>32</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 135.

<sup>33</sup> Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (1854; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 80.



come with an axe or rifle.”<sup>35</sup> Both Thoreau and Muir, in the tradition of the sublime philosophers and painters, found spirituality in the natural world.

Following the Civil War, as the scope of Western exploration increased, the portrayal of the sublime emerged as the image of the American West. Artists who painted the western landscape in the post-bellum years tried to capture the feelings they evoked. The luminist painters of the Rocky Mountain School, in particular, used sublime imagery, making their canvases almost glow, the western landscape bathed in spiritual light.<sup>36</sup> In the eighteenth century, German philosopher Immanuel Kant had declared that sublime landscapes were the special places where a person had the best chance of seeing the face of God.<sup>37</sup> Swiss artist Albert Bierstadt [1830-1902], who began painting the West a few years prior to Muir’s arrival, and others who were educated within the European romantic tradition, depicted a West of majestic mountain ranges, of grand atmospheric and geologic forces at work in an almost supernatural display.<sup>38</sup> Their style

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<sup>35</sup> Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> John Wilmerding, *American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850-1875* (Washington: Harper & Row, 1980), 12; Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 28-33.

<sup>37</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, William Cronon, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 73. Kant described the sublime in Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (1764; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

<sup>38</sup> Bierstadt’s paintings reached the public by the late 1850s but his Western landscape portrayals catapulted him to fame in the mid-1860s.

became known as the luminist tradition of painting.<sup>39</sup> Luminist painters captured the majesty of their landscapes using light and scale rather than monumental size, as in other landscape paintings.<sup>40</sup> Bierstadt was unique in applying both techniques in his paintings but he was not the first romantic landscape painter to attempt to capture the *transcendent* on canvas. Thomas Cole [1801-1848], Frederic Church [1826-1900], and other artists of the Hudson River School had popularized the genre, portraying upstate New York, a few years prior. The landscape of the American West, however, seemed to offer the ideal combination of light, majesty, and natural wonders to enable artists to capture the sublime images they sought. Bierstadt's paintings popularized the West and the Yosemite Valley as a sort of heaven on earth, a place where one might encounter God, a magnificent paradise.<sup>41</sup> He shaped America's view of the West as hallowed ground, as a place where one might transcend the physical world and come into contact with the higher realm depicted by the transcendentalists. Bierstadt's romantic portrayal of the West helped influence America's image of the region and, surely, Muir's as well.<sup>42</sup> Muir also attempted to capture the images of the Sierra, conveying the same transcendent emotions and feelings these painters had sought to evoke, but he relied on words rather than paint.

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<sup>39</sup> William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *West of the imagination* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 148-49.

<sup>40</sup> Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Goetzmann, *West of the Imagination*, 148-49; Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (1979; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-67.

In 1860, at the age of twenty two, Muir came under the influence of Jeanne Carr and her husband Ezra. Muir met Jeanne Carr at the Wisconsin State Fair that year while he was displaying his inventions. An amateur botanist, author, and a fellow lover of nature, Jeanne Carr became Muir's mentor over a thirty-year correspondence; it was Carr who eventually pushed Muir toward a literary career. Carr introduced Muir to liberal Christianity, and she comforted and advised him throughout their lifelong friendship. They shared a spiritual celebration of nature.<sup>43</sup> Muir lacked a strong motherly figure during his childhood and Jeanne Carr filled that role, to some extent, during Muir's early adulthood. He also gendered the wilderness as female, as Mother Nature, in the same vein. Additionally, during his youth, he had difficulty relating to women romantically; the natural world filled that feminine void within the young man.

Ezra Carr became one of Muir's botany professors at the University of Wisconsin, and the two men became close friends. Professor Carr taught Muir that nature had an "essential unity with boundless variety, so that the botanist has only to examine plants to learn the harmony of their relations."<sup>44</sup> This idea was life-changing. "This fine lesson," Muir explained, "sent me flying to the woods and meadows in wild enthusiasm. Like everybody else I was always fond of flowers, attracted by their external beauty and purity. Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing glorious

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<sup>43</sup> Their letters were published in John Muir, *Letters to a Friend: Written to Mrs. Ezra S. Carr, 1866-1879* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915); John Muir and Jeanne Carr, *Kindred and Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr*, ed. Bonnie Johanna Gisell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Muir, *Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, 225.

traces of the thoughts of God, and leading on and on into the infinite cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> This insight shows Muir merging Transcendentalist philosophy with Carr’s teachings, through direct encounter with his environment, as he saw traces of God in the interconnected web of nature.

In 1867, soon after recovering his eyesight, and shortly after the Civil War, he kept the promise he had made to God by walking to the Gulf of Mexico to immerse himself in nature. Muir made little reference to the Civil War, Reconstruction, or the abolition of slavery, focusing instead on his own freedom. This trek to the Deep South and eventually to California led him to experience the freedom he had dreamed of.<sup>46</sup> Muir took the first step of his thousand mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico on September 1, 1867, carrying only some toiletries, a change of underclothing, a volume of Robert Burns’ poems, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and the *New Testament*. He walked away from the world he knew, feeling free and full of joy.<sup>47</sup> Muir surely felt a kinship with Robert Burns. The fellow Scot, known as Scotland’s favorite son, is credited with influencing many of the Romantic poets, who laid the foundation for the Transcendentalists, and his writing exhibited strong Biblical and radical influences. Burns’ life and poetry provided inspiration for young Muir as he headed south, having felt drawn for quite some time “toward the Lord’s tropic gardens of the South.”<sup>48</sup> Often covering twenty-five miles per

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>46</sup> Stoll, “God and John Muir,” in *John Muir: Life and Work*, ed. Sally M. Miller, 70-71.

<sup>47</sup> Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk*, xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., xv.

day, he was filled with gratitude and a sense of freedom.<sup>49</sup> He traveled “by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find . . . rejoicing in splendid visions of pines and palms and tropic flowers in glorious array, not, however, without a few cold shadows of loneliness.”<sup>50</sup> Despite his awakening sense of freedom, Muir felt a bit forlorn.

The intensive Biblical upbringing deeply influenced Muir’s thoughts and writing. “Here is the Eden, the paradise of oaks,” he observed in southern Kentucky.<sup>51</sup> A few days later in the dense Tennessee woods, he exclaimed, “Oh, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity, in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of detail! Who shall read the teaching of these sylvan pages . . . all the happy creatures that dwell in them under the tender keeping of a Father’s care?”<sup>52</sup> The use of the words “Eden” and “Father” suggests that he was still thinking along Christian lines, although he saw nature as pages of a book, waiting to be learned from. Throughout his life, he continued to use Biblical imagery to describe the landscape. Although the strong Biblical influence he absorbed as a child remained evident in his writing, Muir broke from interpreting the stories from the Bible literally, as his father had preached.

During his trek to the Gulf, Muir’s descriptions of nature also revealed his Transcendentalist thought, and his writing is steeped in transcendental ideas. “They tell

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 39.

us that plants are perishable, soulless creatures, that only man is immortal,” he observed, and yet he contended, “this, I think, is something that we know very nearly nothing about!”<sup>53</sup> He was learning directly from nature rather than from books or people. In another instance, as he awoke to the dazzling fall colors near the banks of the Cumberland River in southern Kentucky, he observed the scene from a hilltop as if it were a painting, “The soft light of morning falls upon ripening forests of oak and elm, walnut and hickory and all Nature is thoughtful and calm.”<sup>54</sup> This is likely the first time Muir capitalized the “N” in Nature, associating God with Nature in Transcendentalist fashion.<sup>55</sup> He was beginning to find divinity in the wild as he journeyed.

John Muir’s philosophy was growing and changing, showing signs of a newly synthesized belief system taking root. Spending the night in a cemetery lined with moss-draped oaks near Savannah, Muir philosophized about the continuity, the essential unity of death and life. If only people would observe the lessons taught in woods and meadows, he wrote, they would “learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony.”<sup>56</sup> These words signified very different spiritual ideas than those bestowed upon him by his father. It was perhaps his father who came to mind, though, when he observed during his wanderings through the swamps of Florida that “Many good people believe that alligators

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

were created by the Devil. . . . But doubtless these creatures are happy and fill the place assigned them by the great Creator of us all. Fierce and cruel they appear to us, but beautiful in the eyes of God. They, also, are his children, for He hears their cries, cares for them tenderly, and provides their daily bread.”<sup>57</sup> He scoffed at the idea that nature was created for man. Few people, he argued, understood God and his creation. God created plants and animals for their own sake and not for the happiness of man alone. All of God’s creatures were necessary to complete the cosmos. True, creation would be deficient without man, but the universe would be incomplete without microscopic organisms as well.<sup>58</sup> Muir concluded that God made man and all other creatures from the same dust. He felt that his Biblical education had been flawed and chose to learn, instead, from “the immortal truth and immortal beauty of Nature.”<sup>59</sup> Muir stripped away the layers of learned ideas in the wild, discovering his own truth.

Yet Muir had not become fully enamored with the wild in the Deep South; he continued to long for the familiar middle landscape of farms and fields. For example, he wrote that the moss-laden cypress countryside near Savannah made “one feel far from the people and plants and fruitful fields of home. Night is coming on and I am filled with indescribable loneliness. Felt feverish; bathed in a black, silent stream; nervously watchful for alligators.”<sup>60</sup> In a similar tone, he observed, “Everything in earth and sky

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 138-39.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 140-41.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 58.

had an impression of strangeness; not a mark of friendly recognition, not a breath, not a spirit whisper of sympathy came from anything about me, and of course I was lonely . . . listening to the profound strangeness.”<sup>61</sup> The landscape of the South left Muir feeling frightened and uneasy. The region had recently served as the setting for the bloody Civil War and it is likely he viewed nature through these darkened lenses.

His anxious feelings did not arise from loneliness. In fact, he had become something of a misanthrope. Perhaps he equated escaping his from father with avoiding people, as he sought the freedom to explore his own ideas without outside influences. “I wandered wearily from dune to dune,” he wrote of his roving along the Georgia coast, “searching for a place to sleep beneath the tall flowers, free from insects and snakes, and above all from my fellow man.”<sup>62</sup> Two weeks later, near the Florida coast at Cedar Keys, he realized, “I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears.”<sup>63</sup> Although Muir began to have spiritual insights during his journey through the South, he still felt forlorn and uneasy; he had challenged and found fault with the ideas of his youth, but had not yet come up with a solid foundational philosophy to replace the old. The palmettos of the South did not provide what he was seeking.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 121-22.



In April 1868, Muir's wanderings finally led him to California. Arriving in San Francisco, he remained there for only one day before journeying toward Yosemite Valley.<sup>64</sup> Muir had described the South as a dreadfully lonely landscape, a strange land covered with "solemn, dark, mysterious cypress woods," full of "strange sounds;" here in the mountains of the West he found himself bathed in divine light.<sup>65</sup> Breathing in the air, he rhapsodized, "I do not believe that Adam and Eve ever tasted better in their balmiest nook."<sup>66</sup> At Twenty Hill Hollow, Muir immersed himself in the landscape's beauty and became baptized. "If you wish to see how much of light, life, and joy can be got into a January," he advised, "go to this blessed Hollow. If you wish to see a plant-resurrection,—myriads of bright flowers crowding from the ground, like souls to a judgment,—go to Twenty Hills in February." Just as Henry David Thoreau had found spiritual awakening at Walden Pond, so did Muir find awakening here. "Bask in its flower-shine," he counseled, "and your baptisms will make you a new creature indeed. Or, choked in the sediments of society, so tired of the world, here will . . . your soul breathe deep and free in God's shoreless atmosphere of beauty and love."<sup>67</sup> Muir frames this, and many of his experiences in the mountains, within the Judeo-Christian ideology of his father's Biblical teachings.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 188-89.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 210-11.

Muir quickly fell in love with the beauty of California, especially the Sierra Nevada, the Yosemite Valley, and the San Joaquin Valley. He would explore much of California throughout his life, but his first impressions never left him. As he entered the wilderness of the Pacific Rim, he experienced an epiphany. California's dramatic landscapes and the meditative periods he indulged in while exploring them gave Muir a new sense of liberation. No more harsh Christianity, no more seventeen-hour days, no more severe beatings. Now he was free.

As he awakened to the beauty of the Sierra, Muir unquestionably appreciated the eyesight he had nearly lost. "The radiance in some places is so great as to be fairly dazzling, keen lance rays of every color flashing, sparkling in glorious abundance, joining the plants in their fine, brave beauty-work," he observed, "every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator."<sup>68</sup> His five senses were undoubtedly sharpening as his awareness immediately grew. "Never before have I seen clouds so substantial looking in form and texture," he exalted. "Nearly every day toward noon they rise with visible swelling motion as if new worlds were being created."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, he proclaimed, "The place seemed holy, where one might hope to see God."<sup>70</sup> Muir found his own God in the Sierra's grandeur as well as in its delicate displays of beauty. At the end of his first month, Muir reflected on his spiritual rebirth. "And so this memorable month ends, a stream of beauty unmeasured," he celebrated, "a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>69</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 49.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 65.

peaceful, joyful stream of beauty. Every morning, arising from the death of sleep, the happy plants and all our fellow animal creatures great and small, and even the rocks, seemed to be shouting, ‘Awake, awake, rejoice, rejoice, come love us and join in our song. Come! Come!’”<sup>71</sup> He linked his own spiritual awakening with the daily awakening of nature.

John Muir’s writing, as historian Michael Cohen has pointed out, suggests Buddhist philosophy, although it is not clear whether he was familiar with Buddhism or had absorbed Eastern philosophy largely through Thoreau’s writings. Buddhism stresses the importance of time spent alone in meditation, and Muir spent much time alone in the wilderness where he surely entered deep meditation states, possibly reaching the level of awareness sought by Buddhists. When he stepped into the wilderness, everything he encountered became the object of his worship, all the wilderness, his temple. “When we are with Nature we are awake,” he wrote, “we are aware.”<sup>72</sup> In Buddhist thought, too, awareness and wakefulness are signs of enlightenment. Late in life, the Buddha was asked how he was different from other men; “I am awake,” was his simple response. Thoreau, drawing explicitly on Hinduism, also wrote in this vein, and Muir may be exhibiting his study of that philosopher. Perhaps Muir was no Buddhist, but he was certainly more awake than most people.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>72</sup> John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. Linnie Marsh Wolfe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 300, 313.

Following the Transcendentalist rhetoric, Muir used sublime imagery to describe his awakening and the distinctive landscape. “Never before had I seen so glorious a landscape, so boundless an affluence of sublime mountain beauty,” he recalled as he was overwhelmed with the luminous range.<sup>73</sup> Although Bierstadt and other landscape painters had attempted to capture the spiritual glow on canvas, Muir admitted that he could not adequately describe that feeling. “It is easier to feel than to realize, or in any way explain Yosemite grandeur,” he explained. Then he urged his readers to come to California and experience it themselves.<sup>74</sup>

Muir’s worship of the Sierra Nevada drew on the iconography of the luminist landscape painters. “Probably more free sunshine falls on this majestic range than on any other in the world I’ve ever seen or heard of. It has the brightest weather, brightest glacier-polished rocks . . . glorious waterfalls, the brightest forests of silver firs and silver pines.” His descriptions of the sublime expressed the awe he found in the majesty of nature, the presence of God in the play of light on the Sierra. “And how glorious the shining after the short summer showers and after frosty nights when the morning sunbeams are pouring through the crystals on the grass and pine needles, and how ineffably spiritually fine is the morning-glow on the mountain-tops and the alpenglow of evening. Well may the Sierra be named, not the Snowy Range, but the Range of Light.”<sup>75</sup> The phrase “Range of Light” comes from the luminist painters, who bathed their

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<sup>73</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 153.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-16.

landscapes in the sun's radiance, signifying God. "One seems to be in a majestic domed pavilion in which a grand play is being acted with scenery and music and incense," Muir wrote soon after his arrival, adding that "God himself seems to be always doing his best here, working like a man in a glow of enthusiasm."<sup>76</sup> This is a classic Transcendentalist idea, seeing divinity on a large scale. God could be found in the tumultuous rush of the waterfall and in the glorious ascent of the mountain peak into the cloudy heavens. "This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California," Muir exclaimed, "led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper. In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars."<sup>77</sup> Away from his father, Muir derived his own ideas about God.

Not only did Muir find God in the magnificent, he also found divinity in the delicate expressions of nature. Reaching his first summit, Muir felt a sense of elation and peace.<sup>78</sup> The wind itself carried God's message, "How gently the winds blow! Scarce can these tranquil aircurrents be called winds. They seem the very breath of Nature, whispering peace to every living thing."<sup>79</sup> When Muir captured these images into words, they were much more evocative than his descriptions of the Southern wilderness. During his first summer in the high Sierra, he worked as a shepherd at Tuolumne Meadows, which afforded him ample opportunity to wander. "The stream flowing past the camp

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 48.

through ferns and lilies and alders makes sweet music to the ear, but the pines marshaled around the edge of the sky make a yet sweeter music to the eye. Divine beauty all.”<sup>80</sup> He described the minty fragrance of the air and thanked God for the air-breath, noticing that the more subtle aspects of wilderness were also suffused with divinity.<sup>81</sup> The West glistened clear and clean to the young man; it lacked the lingering darkness that he felt in the South following the Civil War.

Historians agree that Muir underwent a spiritual awakening in the Sierra Nevada, but the awakening was intertwined with spiritual and physical freedoms, which he viewed as connected. This experience finally reached a crescendo soon after his arrival. Muir’s writing enlarges upon the theme of freedom; he felt overwhelmed by a sense of liberation in the wild. In the spring of 1869, Muir equated the life of a vagabond with freedom. Although he became a sheepherder, he reconciled himself to the prospect of scavenging for food, musing that he might “learn to live like the wild animals, gleaning nourishment here and there from seeds, berries, etc., sauntering and climbing in joyful independence of money or baggage.”<sup>82</sup> Muir’s celebration of poverty is reflective of his status as middle class. Muir and other people who walk away from the responsibilities and expectations of middle class life, to search for divinity, often view the deliberate embrace of scarcity as the antitheses of greed. This complicates our understanding of class, yet, it is not a new idea. Over two thousand years ago, Siddhārtha Gautama

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

Buddha left a royal family and the promise of immense wealth on his quest for understanding and, ultimately, enlightenment. Along the same vein, he mused, “Gladly, if I could, I would live forever on pine buds, however full of turpentine and pitch, for the sake of this grand independence.”<sup>83</sup> Muir perceived living on this simple diet as liberating, while those raised in poverty might view it as mere survival.

In California Muir experienced the independence he had longed for. Gazing down upon Yosemite Valley from atop a 4,000 foot cliff, he rejoiced that he was not “bound by clocks, almanacs, orders, duties, etc. . . where Nature is covered and her voice smothered, while the poor, insignificant wanderer enjoys the freedom and glory of God's wilderness.”<sup>84</sup> He had broken free from his constraints. Muir, too, reveals his liberation from the Victorian era pressures on white, middle class, Protestant men who were expected to be orderly both in their physical comportment and their professional lives.<sup>85</sup> On one occasion, Muir found some missing sheep huddled together, fenced in by chaparral, “afraid to go out to feed,” and he equated them with the human condition. “Having escaped restraint, they were, like some people we know of,” he observed, “afraid of their freedom, did not know what to do with it, and seemed glad to get back into the old familiar bondage.”<sup>86</sup> Muir drew this parallel between physical and spiritual

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 237-38.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>85</sup> Susan Walton, *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 4.

<sup>86</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 77.

freedom soon after his arrival in the Sierra. “Just now I can hardly conceive of any bodily condition dependent on food or breath any more than the ground or the sky,” he reflected as he gazed out over the valley from the edge of a plateau on his ascent up the Sierra, encircled by yellow and sugar pines and Mariposa tulips. “How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is, scarce memory enough of old bondage days left as a standpoint to view it from!”<sup>87</sup> Muir appreciated the glory of his conversion from the vantage point of his former years in Wisconsin, which, in hindsight, resembled a prison.

Unlike the Transcendentalists, Muir fused nature with science. He was the first to discover and document the glaciation of the Sierra Nevada. But, merging his botanical lessons with his spiritual lens, he also recognized that nature formed an interconnected web. “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow-mountaineers.”<sup>88</sup> His university training taught him that “every atom in creation may be said to be acquainted with and married to every other, but with universal union there is a division sufficient in degree for the purposes of the most intense individuality.”<sup>89</sup> Muir did not perceive physical nature’s display as merely scientific; it also bore the design of

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 211-12.

<sup>89</sup> John Muir, *Steep Trails*, ed. William Frederic Badè (San Francisco: Random House, 1918), 87.



the creator. “Not only are the individual trees admirable in symmetry and superb in foliage and port, but half a dozen or more often form temple groves in which the trees are so nicely graded in size and position as to seem one.”<sup>90</sup> The formation of the Yosemite Valley itself could not have been an accident or a coincidence; according to Muir, it was designed by God to display the perfect harmony of nature.<sup>91</sup> Muir’s hybrid blend of philosophy and science found its fullest expression in the West.

Not only was all of nature interconnected, Muir realized, humans were also a *part* of nature, not *apart* from it. “We are now in the mountains and they are in us,” he wrote, “kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun.”<sup>92</sup> Despite his experience of the divine in the mountains, Muir gained a sense of humility, of his personal insignificance in God’s grand scheme. “Up here,” he wrote, “all the world’s prizes seem nothing.”<sup>93</sup> His liberation was the greatest treasure the earth had to offer.

Although his journey through the South had opened his eyes to some extent, in the West he truly felt physically and spiritually free. For Muir, these ideas were strongly intertwined. He described his philosophical evolution in a letter to his brother, Daniel, “I

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<sup>90</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 130.

<sup>91</sup> Fox, *John Muir and his Legacy*, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 20-21.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

think I might preach Nature like an apostle, but if I should enter an ordinary ecclesestical pulpit, I fear I should be found preaching much that was unsanctified & unorthodox.”<sup>94</sup>

Muir played with the concept of freedom, observing that he was now imprisoned by the wilderness. He wrote to his sister, Sarah, “. . . I am a captive I am bound . . . I know that I could under ordinary circumstances accumulate wealth & obtain a fair position in society & I am arrived at an age that requires that I should choose some definite course for life.” Muir realized his lifestyle was far from normal. “But I am sure that the mind of no truant school boy is more free & disengaged from all the grave plans & purposes & pursuits of ordinary orthodox life than mine.”<sup>95</sup> He delighted in his break from middle class society. Writing to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Muir described a tree much as he described his own life, “Here is [Ramoset?] with whom you are acquainted & with whom I spent a night & day. He is noble in form & behaviour as any Sequoia friend that I have - less proper- less orthodox than his two companions but has more dignity - more freedom,

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from [John Muir] to Dan[iel H. Muir], 1869 Apr 17, John Muir Correspondence, University of the Pacific Library Holt-Atherton Special Collections, accessed 12 March, 2012, <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/muirletters/id/11630/rec/1>

<sup>95</sup> Letter from John Muir to Sarah [Muir Galloway], 1869 Aug 1, John Muir Correspondence, University of the Pacific Library Holt-Atherton Special Collections, accessed 12 March, 2012, <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/muirletters/id/11464/rec/6>

wh' he manifests by the curving & thrusting of every limb.”<sup>96</sup> Emerson and Muir each celebrated their break from conformity in their writing.

John Muir was also a contemporary of Frederick Jackson Turner, who published his historic work, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” roughly twenty-five years after Muir’s arrival in the Sierra.<sup>97</sup> Turner and Muir rarely mentioned Native Americans in their writing. John Muir displayed inconsistent views toward American Indians. Although radically progressive in his thoughts about nature, he remained a product of his time and upbringing in his perception of Native Americans. Later writers romanticized the West and its original people, which persuaded visitors to view nature and American Indians more positively.

While pondering the lives of Indians, Muir explored his conflicting beliefs. “A strangely dirty and irregular life these dark-eyed, dark-haired, half-happy savages lead in this clean wilderness, —starvation and abundance, deathlike calm, indolence, and admirable, indefatigable action succeeding each other in stormy rhythm like winter and summer.”<sup>98</sup> He likened their lives to the changing of the seasons. “One of the Indians

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from John Muir to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, [1871] Jul 6, John Muir Correspondence, University of the Pacific Library Holt-Atherton Special Collections, accessed 12, March, 2012, <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/muirletters/id/10342/rec/41>

<sup>97</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” In *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894).

<sup>98</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1911), 277-78.

from Brown's Flat got right into the middle of the camp this morning, unobserved," Muir wrote in his journal on June 16, 1869. "I was seated on a stone, looking over my notes and sketches, and happening to look up, was startled to see him standing grim and silent within a few steps of me, as motionless and weather-stained as an old tree-stump that had stood there for centuries." Muir admired how silently the man had entered his camp. "All Indians seem to have learned this wonderful way of walking unseen, —making themselves invisible . . ." <sup>99</sup> Despite his praise of the, "wild Indian power of escaping observation . . .," Muir labeled him a "wild Indian." <sup>100</sup> It is interesting that Muir did not have more empathy with Indians in general. He held an ethereal perception of nature whereas most Euroamericans viewed wilderness as a region to be feared and avoided; Indians saw this land as "home."

Muir seldom identified any Indian tribal affiliation, relying on the general term, Indian. In this context, historian Margaret Jacobs noted that Americans have often homogenized American Indians rather than choosing to honor individual or tribal differences. <sup>101</sup> On another occasion, Muir observed, ". . . Indians walk softly and hurt the landscape hardly more than the birds and squirrels, . . ." <sup>102</sup> He noted that white men, by comparison, leave, ". . . roads blasted in the solid rock, wild streams dammed and tamed .

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>101</sup> Margaret Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>102</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), 73.

. . These are the white man's marks made in a few feverish years . . .”<sup>103</sup> A few days later, however, he contradicted himself. After describing an Indian woman's quiet entrance into his camp on June 18, he concluded, “from no point of view that I have found are such debased fellow beings a whit more natural than the glaring tailored tourists we saw that frightened the birds and squirrels.”<sup>104</sup> Muir was not unique in his contradictory treatment of American Indians in his writing. Historian Philip Deloria notes in *Playing Indian* that Americans have often held these conflicting opinions concerning Indian people.<sup>105</sup> However, Muir's beliefs make sense if one considers the historical context of his life. This was the era of the Indian wars, the Dawes Act, federal assimilation policies, and Indian boarding schools. Many Americans held conflicting views of American Indians during the late nineteenth century. Although prejudice is evident in some of Muir's statements, he remained steadfast in his progressive views of preserving nature.

John Muir never wavered from the ideas and beliefs shaped by his first summer in California's mountains. Over the course of his life, he spent considerable time in wilderness areas throughout the world, but the West, and more specifically the Sierra Nevada, remained his wilderness of choice. Eventually he married, acquired material comforts, and slowed his adventurous pace to enjoy family life. Still, he traveled to

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>105</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 254.

Alaska, Australia, South America, Africa, Europe, China, and Japan, exploring the world in search of beauty, freedom, and God, and he was seldom disappointed.<sup>106</sup>

Muir gained recognition as a writer and naturalist in 1874, with the publication of a series of articles titled “Studies in the Sierra.” During the last twenty-five years of his life he published extensively. In his writings he shared his philosophy and his love of the natural world and challenged others to find their own truth through nature. Over the course of his lifetime, Muir published some three hundred articles and ten books, hoping to inspire others. He urged his readers to take action by losing themselves in the wilderness and fighting for legislation that would protect prized landscapes for generations to come. He aimed his writings toward ordinary citizens and the government from the lowest levels all the way up to the president.<sup>107</sup>

In 1901, when Muir’s most famous book, *Our National Parks*, appeared, it drew the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt. After the president contacted Muir, the Scot promptly invited him to visit Yosemite for a camping trip. In 1903, the two men had a grand time camping in the mountains, where they discussed Roosevelt’s future conservation and preservation programs. Muir encouraged Roosevelt to create national parks and monuments and to pressure Congress for environmental conservation and preservation legislation. He was largely successful in this endeavor.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Muir and Carr, *Kindred and Related Spirits*, ed. Bonnie Johanna Gisel, 367-68.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 369-70.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

Late in life, Muir took a much more active role in the budding movement for conservation and preservation, realizing that his work could have a major impact in the United States and beyond. He dreamed that others would have the opportunity to experience the same spiritual freedom he had discovered in the wild. His first major effort sought to protect Yosemite Valley from overgrazing, and in 1890, largely due to Muir's efforts, Congress redesignated Yosemite National Park and expanded its boundaries. Yosemite was Muir's first major success, but certainly not his last. Later, he helped to create Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest, and Grand Canyon national parks.<sup>109</sup>

In 1892, Muir formed the Sierra Club, perhaps his most acclaimed accomplishment. He served as president of the hiking club until his death in 1914. Muir and the Sierra Club battled to protect the Yosemite, the Sierra Nevada, and other undeveloped regions, a struggle that filled the remainder of Muir's life. What he perceived as his greatest failure occurred in 1913. After fighting for several years to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park, the battle ended in defeat. Developers dammed the Tuolumne River to supply San Francisco with water, and the lovely valley was inundated.<sup>110</sup>

Muir died of pneumonia on Christmas Eve of 1914, perhaps grieving the recent defeat, but his words and his legacy live on. Sadly, he did not live to see Congress' creation of the National Park Service in 1916. In 1915, many of his writings were

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 369-70.

<sup>110</sup> Runte, *National Parks*, 59-82.

published posthumously, including *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, *Steep Trails*, *Travels in Alaska*, and *Cruise of the Corwin*. In the early twenty-first century the Sierra Club maintained the fight for wilderness protection.<sup>111</sup>

As Muir wandered through the Sierra Nevadas, the majestic landscape of the Western wilderness created a spiritual awakening that was closely tied with the freedom he experienced. Years later, he celebrated the return of his eyesight in a letter to writer and fellow naturalist, Robert Underwood Johnson, as he praised Yosemite enthusiasts as, “clean & clear eyed lovers of God's fountain beauti [sic] . . . ” and contrasted them with, “. . . the commercial heathen in his blindness . . . ” who profited from the destruction of wilderness.<sup>112</sup> Months before he arrived in the Sierra, Muir left home to wander in the wild; his upbringing by a tyrannical father made him desire physical and spiritual freedom intensely. He began his walk unsure of where it would take him, putting his future in God’s hands. But soon, as he trekked through the Deep South to the Gulf of Mexico, he began to experience the freedom he sought and saw the early glimmers of spiritual enlightenment, despite lingering feelings of constraint. His experience of freedom and of spiritual awakening finally reached a crescendo, however, quickly after his arrival in the California. After his first month in the Sierra, Muir reflected, “Looking back through the stillness and romantic enchanting beauty and peace . . . this June seems

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<sup>111</sup> Muir and Carr, *Kindred and Related Spirits*, ed. Bonnie Johanna Gisell, 370.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from John Muir to [Robert Underwood] Johnson, 1889 Dec 6, John Muir Correspondence, University of the Pacific Library Holt-Atherton Special Collections, accessed 12 March, 2012, <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/muirletters/id/13377/rec/4>



the greatest of all the months of my life, the most truly, divinely free, boundless like eternity, immortal.”<sup>113</sup> He experienced an epiphany that physical and spiritual freedom were closely tied.

John Muir’s writing reflected deeply spiritual values. He discovered greater levels of freedom as he formed a connection with nature and the divine and welcomed the physical and spiritual healing that it offered; with the enthusiasm of a missionary, he spent the rest of his life trying to share his discovery with others, both contemporaries and future generations. Raised in a strict evangelical Christian tradition, Muir turned his back on that faith. And yet, he became a proselytizer of sorts.<sup>114</sup> “Heaven knows that John Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God’s mountains,” he admitted.<sup>115</sup> Muir never wavered from his missionary zeal, continuously pushing his wilderness gospel on others, even the tourist whom he often criticized. “It seems strange,” he lamented, “that visitors to Yosemite should be so little influenced by its novel grandeur, as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped. Most of those I saw yesterday were looking down as if wholly unconscious of anything going on about them.”<sup>116</sup>

At an early age, Muir had become enamored with the Romantics, Transcendentalists, and other philosophers and poets. Many of these writers reflected his

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<sup>113</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 90.

<sup>114</sup> Righter, *Battle Over Hetch Hetchy*, 91-92.

<sup>115</sup> Muir, *John of the Mountains*, 86.

<sup>116</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 255-56

sensitivity toward the natural world, and, to some extent, he modeled his life after them. He was drawn to their dismissal of a utilitarian view of the natural world, only to be used and exploited by humans. Muir agreed that nature had healing spiritual powers and divine qualities. Despite the attraction of the Transcendentalists—he even entertained Emerson at Yosemite—he would take an active role in exploring the wilderness and fighting for preservation legislation.<sup>117</sup> He put philosophy into practice.

Muir's spiritual ideas, in the end, seem to be a mixture of pantheistic Transcendentalism, Christianity, and a smattering of botany. He synthesized a unique blend of spirituality derived from his formal and informal education. He studied nature and its interconnectedness, merged that with his earlier Biblical education, and added pantheistic ideas. His lifelong friend Jeanne Carr taught him a version of liberal Christianity and introduced him to a more loving God, quite different from that depicted by his father. In this way he united his scientific and religious views, concluding that all living things, not just humans, had value and were loved by God. For Muir, wilderness retained healing properties for man's soul.

More than a century after Muir first looked out over the heights of the Sierra Nevada, Robert Pirsig wrote of his own spiritual journey in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, words that resonated with Muir's own pilgrimage:

Mountains like these and travelers in the mountains and events that happen to them here are found not only in Zen literature but in the tales of every major religion. The allegory of a physical mountain for the spiritual one that stands between each soul and its goal is an easy and natural one to make. Like those in the valley behind us, most people stand in sight of the spiritual mountains all their

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<sup>117</sup> Stoll, "God and John Muir," 68-69.

lives and never enter them, being content to listen to others who have been there and thus avoid the hardships. Some travel into the mountains accompanied by experienced guides who know the best and least dangerous routes by which they arrive at their destination. Still others, inexperienced and untrusting, attempt to make their own routes. Few of these are successful, but occasionally some, by sheer will and luck and grace, do make it. Once there they become more aware than any of the others that there's no single or fixed number of routes. There are as many routes as there are individual souls.<sup>118</sup>

John Muir found his unique way up the mountain, physically and spiritually. The West provided the perfect setting for him to find his own path. Surely Muir understood this when he wrote, “Doubly happy . . . is the man [for] whom lofty mountain tops are within reach, for the lights that shine there illumine all that lies below.”<sup>119</sup> The mountains enabled Muir to articulate a wilderness gospel that would resound into the twenty-first century. Muir dedicated his life to future generations, trusting they, too, would create paths leading up their physical and spiritual mountains.

Historian William Cronon observed in “The Trouble with Wilderness,” that humans have been frightened of wilderness areas for millennia. Until the last two hundred and fifty years, Judeo-Christian literature depicted wilderness in Biblical terms. It was “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” or “barren.” It was a place where one would become “bewildered,” a notion that lay at the linguistic roots of “wilderness.” Christ battled Satan and suffered his temptations in the wilderness.<sup>120</sup> Rebelling against this, Muir explored wilderness areas and tried to convey through his writings that they are not

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<sup>118</sup> Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 167.

<sup>119</sup> Muir, *Steep Trails*, 192.

<sup>120</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 70.

so scary after all, that true liberation could be found there. Under Muir's guidance, mainstream Americans discovered a sacred dimension in the wilderness. Perhaps Muir's journey into the wilderness echoed Christ's journey into the wilderness; it was there that each found God.

John Muir experienced each of the qualities that philosopher and psychologist William James associated with mystical experiences.<sup>121</sup> First, he struggled with his inability to convey the beauty of the wilderness through words. "The most extravagant description I might give of this view to any one [sic] who has not seen similar landscapes with his own eyes would not so much as hint its grandeur and the spiritual glow that covered it."<sup>122</sup> Second, Muir believed his experiences had conveyed knowledge to him. A palmetto, he observed, "was indescribably impressive and told me grander things than I ever got from [a] human priest."<sup>123</sup> Third, Muir's descriptions of his mystical experiences show that they were short-lived. He returned quickly to his descriptive analytical approach of documenting his surroundings. Finally, Muir often felt as if he were overpowered by a divine force. On another instance, Muir explained that his, "love of pure unblemished Nature seems to over- master [sic] & blur out of sight all other

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<sup>121</sup> Psychologist and philosopher William James noted that all mystical experiences possess ineffability and noetic qualities while most mystical experiences are transient and passive (that is, grasped by a greater or higher power); William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 332-34.

<sup>122</sup> Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 153.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

objects & considerations.”<sup>124</sup> These experiences suppressed his worldly ambitions and left him with a further craving for the wild.

Muir’s long periods of solitude gave him the chance to confront the beliefs he had been taught as a youth and to reach his own conclusions. Muir eventually became disappointed with many of those readers who satisfied themselves by reading his books from the comfort of their homes, living vicariously through his writings rather than experiencing the wild for themselves. Perhaps he equated them with the lost sheep, afraid of their freedom. Muir was dismayed that some people, like lemmings, did not think for themselves, “Most people who travel look only at what they are directed to look at.” And, indeed, many tourists merely checked off the sights, as though keeping a scenic inventory list. “Great is the power of the guidebook maker,” he wrote with disgust, “however ignorant.”<sup>125</sup> He was troubled that most travelers “are content with what they can see from car windows or the verandas of hotels, and in going from place to place cling to their precious trains and stages like wrecked sailors to rafts.”<sup>126</sup> For Muir, one needed to deeply immerse oneself in the wild in order to have an authentic transformative experience. He called on his readers to engage in the search for freedom. “Fear not,

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<sup>124</sup> Letter from John Muir to Sarah [Muir Galloway], 1869 Aug 1, John Muir Correspondence, University of the Pacific Library Holt-Atherton Special Collections, accessed 12 March, 2012, <http://digitalcollections.pacific.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/muirletters/id/11464/rec/6>

<sup>125</sup> John Muir, *Travels in Alaska*, ed. Marion Randall Parsons (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1915), 276.

<sup>126</sup> John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 28.

therefore, to try the mountain-passes. They will kill care, save you from deadly apathy, set you free,” he promised.<sup>127</sup>

Several men and women in the early twentieth century who shared Muir’s quest for freedom and his sense of adventure also set out on to immerse themselves in the beauty of the West. Like Muir, the Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan experienced a new sense of freedom—physical, social, and spiritual—in the high-desert Southwest. The Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan, like Muir, found more than they anticipated.

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<sup>127</sup> John Muir, *Mountains of California* (1894; reprint, Atlanta: Norman S. Berg, 1975), 79.

CHAPTER II

TAOS SOCIETY OF ARTISTS AND MABEL DODGE LUHAN

OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE:

FREEDOM FOR ALL?

The artists' colony in Taos dates back to a radiant September morning in 1898, when an easterner arrived by horseback at an unexpectedly glorious valley. The rider, Ernest Blumenschein, was to be forever changed by his first experience of the Taos valley in New Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Frustrated by an unexpected broken wagon wheel, he left his fellow artist and traveling companion, Bert Greer Phillips, to watch over their wagon as he toted their wheel toward the valley in search of help. "I started down the mountain on what resulted in the most impressive journey of my life," Blumenschein explained. "The color, the reflective character of the landscape, the drama of the vast open spaces, the superb beauty and severity of the hills, stirred me deeply. . . . New Mexico inspired me to a profound degree."<sup>2</sup> The landscape took him by surprise. "I rode over foothills, through gorges, out upon the great desert plateau, saw adobe villages of flat-roofed earth colored houses built about a plaza. Slowly I moved across a vast sage-brush [sic] plain under vast and beautiful skies; in the distance snow capped [sic] mountains, romantic mountains, grim everlasting mountains," Blumenschein recalled. "I saw a few wild animals, a few strange dark people but they were quite insignificant in this superb

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<sup>1</sup> William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: Norton, 1986), 353.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 353.

landscape. All the time I was juggling that wheel, my eye was enraptured by the glorious impressions.”<sup>3</sup> Echoing John Muir, Blumenschein recalled, “Never shall I forget the first powerful impressions; my own impressions direct from a new land through my own eyes. Not another man’s picture this, not another’s adventure.” On his arrival in the Sierra, Muir similarly exclaimed, “Never shall I forget my baptism in this font.”<sup>4</sup> Blumenschein reminisced, “The great naked anatomy of a majestic landscape once tortured, now calm; the fitness of adobe houses to their surroundings; the vastness and overwhelming beauty of skies; terrible drama of storms; peace of night—all in beauty of color, vigorous form, ever changing light.”<sup>5</sup> The landscape appeared to him as a masterpiece painting, more beautiful than any he had known previously.

Blumenschein’s mind was filled with possibilities as he returned to Phillips and told him of his plans to capture this unpainted land on canvas to share with the world.<sup>6</sup> “After the wheel was repaired back I went to my partner bubbling with enthusiasm over the new world that he was about to see. He was sitting in a lonely pose beside the wagon

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<sup>3</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, Handwritten notes written on gold colored paper, “Part2, Taos,” p. 2, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>4</sup> John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, ed. William Frederic Badè (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 211

<sup>5</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, “Origin of the Taos Art Colony,” in *El Palacio*, Vol. XX, May 15, 1926, No. 10, p. 191, Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.; Blumenschein, “Part2, Taos,” p. 2, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>6</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 353.



after his vigil of 2 nights and almost three days when I described to him the majestic land of the southwestern plateau that opened up at the foot of this pass,” Blumenschein remembered. “I wondered if he would share my enthusiasm when he passed thro [sic] this plateau land. He did—and so does every artist and writer who comes to that country.”<sup>7</sup> The Taos artists’ colony began to take shape on that very afternoon as Phillips quickly agreed that they had come upon a special place.<sup>8</sup> “The fertile valley [was] a beautiful sight, and inspiration for those who ply the brush for happiness. The primitive people of this out of the way region were harvesting their crops by sunlight and by moonlight. Brown people they were, both Mexicans and Indians, happy people with happy children,” he remembered, “in a garden spot protected by mountains, the “Blood of Christ’ mountains the Spanish priests had named them. And one can’t tell about Taos without dwelling on the mountains that box in the valley on three sides.” Blumenschein continued, “The great plateau of the American Southwest runs from the west to the foot of this range and here, where the creeks spill down into the desert, are trees and earth that only need man’s care to produce all that man needs, frijoles and maize.” He described the region’s rich history in a romantic tone, “So the brown man came here long before the Spaniard, and the Indian Pueblo—that remarkable community home—was built at the mouth of Taos Canon in the stone age.” They found what they had been searching for. “The two artists who stopped at Taos on their wandering journey found so much to

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<sup>7</sup> Blumenschein, “Part2, Taos,” p. 3, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>8</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 353.

admire and respect, and were so deeply moved by the sights and life of this beautiful valley, that they decided they had wandered far enough and here was work for a lifetime.”<sup>9</sup> Many artists, writers, and other visitors have commented on the extraordinary light in northern New Mexico. D.H. Lawrence later summed up the feelings of scores of counterculturalists who eventually moved to the region, “You cannot come to Taos without feeling that here is one of the chosen spots on Earth.”<sup>10</sup> During the subsequent thirty years, many of Blumenschein’s artist friends found their way to Taos. The beauty and the culture of the region gave the artists abundant material to capture on canvas and their visual impressions helped to perpetuate the myth of the West.<sup>11</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, Taos has been a haven for counterculturalists, and the Taos Society of Artists (TSA) and Mabel Dodge Luhan set the stage for the later hippie migration. Historian Lois Rudnick defines the term counterculturalist as an “oppositional stance taken by American reformers, radicals, writers, and artists who have contested the mainstream development of American society and culture—its rationalist bent, its class, gender, and ethnic differentiations and subordinations, and its corporate,

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, “The Taos Society of Artists,” pamphlet, reprinted courtesy of the *American Magazine of Art*, Box 1, Folder Scrapbook, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Bobby Byrd, “Taos: A Brief Portrait,” in Iris Keltz, ed., *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie: Tribal Tales from the Heart of a Cultural Revolution* (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 354.

imperialist, and materialist ethos.”<sup>12</sup> The Taos artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan each fit this definition perfectly; each of them challenged aspects of mainstream American thought through their writing or their artwork. The majestic landscape profoundly influenced these easterners, much as it had John Muir, and its impact impelled them to relocate to the region. The local indigenous inhabitants, however, played a much more significant part in the evolution of these newcomers than it had for Muir. The influences of the landscape and the local residents’ simple, peaceful, coexistence within it, somehow led to the non-mainstream, less materialistic thinking and lifestyle of the new arrivals, they claimed. The divine presence they felt all about them in the sublime surroundings moved them deeply, as it had Muir, and many of them experienced all the necessary elements for what William James called a “mystical experience.” Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier thesis resonated through the public consciousness by the turn of the century and the artists surely viewed the area romantically as the frontier era had recently officially passed. And, like Muir, they sought to share their “discovery” through creative means, in this case writing or artwork.

Many scholars have written about Taos, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and the Taos Society of Artists. Historian Lois Rudnick expertly documents the Mabel Dodge Luhan home from its construction in 1918, through its hippie commune days, and into the present. Rudnick spotlighted the Mabel Dodge Luhan house, built near the center of Taos itself, explaining that it served as a microcosm of the experiences of American and

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<sup>12</sup> Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), xiii.

European radicals and visionaries who sought to heal the wounds inflicted by industrialization and modernity.<sup>13</sup> In *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan's*, Flannery Burke explores Mabel Dodge Luhan and the community of artists and intellectuals who followed Luhan to Taos, including D.H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keefe, and others between 1917 and 1929.<sup>14</sup> Burke focuses on the concept of "primitivism" and describes how Luhan and her friends actually instigated considerable harm in their romanticizing of Taos' residents.<sup>15</sup> None of these works highlights the spiritual aspects of their quest for freedom. My work will build on some of the themes laid out by these authors. I will also show how these ideas are more universal for Taos' newcomers than these authors posit. This chapter is significant to our understanding of the era because it will reveal why the Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan came to Taos seeking freedom—physical, social, and, most notably, spiritual freedom.

Counterculturalists, particularly those with an artistic and intellectual bent, began to flock to the Taos area in the late nineteenth century. The Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan challenged many aspects of mainstream American thought as they laid the foundation for the thousands of hippies who descended into northern New

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Flannery Burke, *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan's* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Also see: Sherry L. Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans Through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret D. Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

Mexico beginning in the late 1960s. “Many artists came and as our paintings began to attract notice, Taos became the subject for many articles in the press,” explained a founding member of the TSA, Ernest L. Blumenschein. Blumenschein described how the art colony began, recalling that initially Oscar E. Berninghaus and E. Irving Couse, “came and they made their reputations and things spread.” The art colony grew organically, with little concerted effort, “all we did was work, try to produce pictures.”<sup>16</sup> They soon reached their goal: the painters received, “prize after prize in the big exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington and Pittsburgh. The Taos Society of Artists was formed and later the New Mexico Painters.”<sup>17</sup> Blumenschein felt as if fate or an unknown force were involved in his work. “I just did what I believe was life and what I believed was necessary for me to do, and I did the best I could always.”<sup>18</sup> A few more artists arrived each year as the art colony’s reputation spread.

After about fifteen years, enough exceptionally gifted artists had arrived to justify creating a Society. Although scores of artists immigrated to the area, only the most talented of them were invited to officially join the TSA. Much to their surprise, the Taos

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<sup>16</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, “Interview with Ernest L. Blumenschein at KOB Radio,” Albuquerque, November 1958, (re-taped by Helen G. Blumenschein, October 10, 1973. The original is on file at Kit Carson Museum, Taos), Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>17</sup> Blumenschein, “Origin of the Taos Art Colony,” in *El Palacio*, Vol. XX, May 15, 1926, No. 10, p. 192, Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>18</sup> Blumenschein, “Interview with Ernest L. Blumenschein at KOB Radio,” Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

Society of Artists' first formal exhibition received abundant newspaper coverage. Blumenschein noted that their paintings traveled, "all over the United States and [it] became an annual affair for 25 years."<sup>19</sup> The colony grew exponentially during the first two decades. Within a few years, Taos hosted seventy-five painters from across the United States as well as others from abroad, and roughly twenty-five artists had permanently relocated to northern New Mexico, Blumenschein explained, noting that many returned to New York over the winter, "We have been very successful in winning recognition both here and abroad. Not all the artists are serious minded about ART. Some are painting pictures to please tourists, but a half dozen of our members are really in the first rank of American painters."<sup>20</sup> Taos continues to attract large numbers of artists, even today.

Immense change characterized the 1910s worldwide. The Great War that destroyed most of a generation of young men in Europe, and led to widespread disillusionment in the U.S., ended in 1918. Mabel Dodge Luhan and the Taos artists withdrew from national political activism during the war, and immediately after, Mabel Dodge fled from New York City to Taos. Five decades later, thousands of hippies would withdraw from national political activism as the Vietnam War ended, and many of them would also flee to Taos. Urban America expanded during the 1910s and 1920s as it was a period of unmatched industrial growth. Farmers and immigrants swelled America's

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Blumenschein, "Part2, Taos," p. 3, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

cities, filling the need for factory workers. Henry Ford mass produced Model T cars, marketing them for less than three hundred dollars each. The Jazz age was just beginning as the temperance movement, prohibition and speakeasies swept the nation. The Progressive Era, a time of great reform, was cut off by the war but not all shared the wealth; many people lived in poverty. On August 26, 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave women the right to vote. The Harlem Renaissance signified a period of artistic and intellectual creativity among African Americans, thousands of whom migrated to New York and other northern cities during and after the war. Despite the swirling activity in the population centers of the East, many Americans nostalgically turned their eyes to the West, to the frontier that seemed to be slipping away. Perhaps they mourned the romantic, mythical West. Perhaps they imagined riding off into the western sunset as the noise and pollution of the East rose triumphantly.

Diverse groups of people had arrived in the Southwest and sought to conquer its peoples from the late sixteenth century forward. Some came for gold, power, or wealth, while others promised they were spreading the word of God and saving souls. Traders, businessmen, merchants, railroad workers, and miners followed, although modernization spread more slowly than in the East. Each conquest attempted to alter the peoples and the land. In 1916, the Museum of New Mexico observed in its magazine, *El Palacio*, “Within the past few years there has appeared the advance guard of a new conquering host which is doing more than merely occupying the land, a host that is taking hold of the imagination of men and creating in them a new and nobler spirit. These invaders are the men of science, literature and of art.” The author is referring to the Taos artists shortly

after the Taos Society of Artists had formally taken shape. “They are in reality rediscovering the Southwest, its potentialities, its beauties. Among them, none are more enthusiastically appreciative than the artists. ‘Here, someday, will be written the great American opera, the great American novel, the great American epic!’ exclaims Walter Ufer, one of the Santa Fe-Taos Art Colony. ‘This country will never be painted out,’ he continued, ‘for it has an infinite variety of moods and types.’” The Taos region provided the perfect blend of majestic landscape, rich history, and exotic peoples; it offered endless opportunities for a diversity of artistic styles. “So it happens that the artist looking for Indian types, for Spanish types, for mountain and desert landscapes, whether he be a conservative or an ultra modernist, finds what he is looking for, and in aspects that never before have been placed on canvas.” The journal went on to list a, “galaxy of names of artists that have made or are making their permanent or summer homes at Santa Fe and Taos.” This was touted as the beginning of a “new and more virile epoch” in the annals of American art.<sup>21</sup>

By 1916, the Taos art colony’s fame had spread throughout the United States. Artists from around the country and beyond traveled to Taos to paint through the summer, and the numbers arriving each year increased dramatically during World War I. Roughly one hundred painters visited northern New Mexico during 1915. Exhibitions by the Art Society proved wildly popular from the beginning. “In fact the society cannot

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<sup>21</sup> “The Santa Fe-Taos Art Colony, Walter Ufer,” (The first of a series of biographical sketches dealing with the members of the Santa Fe-Taos Art Colony), *El Palacio*, V. 16, August, 1916, p. 75, Taos Clippings Collection Folder, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.



produce enough paintings to satisfy all the requests for exhibitions. Each summer some one of the colony produces a prize winning picture, and last year, the banner year, four big prizes came to Taos artists,” Walter Ufer exclaimed. “Some writers (and a number have written us up), have grand words to say of the great American school which will develop from this section. . . . we have never found an atmosphere that makes you work as Taos does, and if hard work and love of your subject will produce the great American school, it should start growing pretty soon,” Ufer explained confidently. By 1916, the official Taos Society of Artists included: E. Irving Couse, Bert G. Phillips, Ernest L. Blumenschein, J. H. Sharp, W. Herbert Dunton, O. E. Berninghaus, Victor Higgens, Walter Ufer, and Julius Rolshoven.<sup>22</sup> Wealthy eastern patrons lusted after the mythical western images these artists captured on canvas.

*El Palacio* acknowledged that Mr. Ufer had painted the familiar scenes of Santa Fe. Yet he has added, the magazine noted, “a new glamour . . . he has done it with the sure stroke of the master, the insight of a poet, with the spirit of a genius.”<sup>23</sup> *El Palacio* described Ufer’s portrait style as steadfastly from the Munich School. His works are, “solid, substantial, workmanlike, serious and thorough, with a broad but faithful realism suggestive of the influence of the old masters. In his western scenes he is vividly and picturesquely American, somewhat primitively American, with the spirit of the

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<sup>22</sup> Blumenschein, “The Taos Society of Artists,” Box 1, Folder Scrapbook, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>23</sup> “The Santa Fe-Taos Art Colony, Walter Ufer,” *El Palacio*, V. 16, August, 1916, p. 76, Taos Clippings Collection Folder, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

Aborigines [sic].” He has a unique style, the magazine observed. “He conveys to us an enjoyment of the sunlight and the air and the freedom of the desert and the mountains such as the Indians themselves must feel. Much of this spontaneity and sparkle arises undoubtedly from the artist’s habit of working out of doors, for he never has painted a studio landscape.”<sup>24</sup> Despite the highly romanticized perceptions of the easterners, a century later, the scenery of the region still provides ample material for artists to render on canvas.

Many of the new residents not only idealized the landscape, they also romanticized the Pueblo people, depicting the Tiwa as a peaceful people living in harmony with the land; and they came to believe that Americans could learn to live a better life by following the Pueblos’ example. They believed the Tiwa speaking people of Taos Pueblo, and the Pueblo people generally, held the key that would cure America’s ills. The Pueblo of Taos, located just three miles north of the center of the village of Taos, remains one of the oldest continually inhabited villages in North America, dating back to the fourteenth century. Many of the Tiwa had converted to Catholicism, but they still practiced a variety of traditional ceremonies, including the Green Corn Dance, the Deer Dance, and the Turtle Dance. Several of the early Taos artists did their best work in depicting these ceremonies.<sup>25</sup> Oftentimes the artists, writers, and freethinkers who came

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<sup>24</sup> “The Santa Fe-Taos Art Colony, Walter Ufer,” *El Palacio*, V. 16, August, 1916, p. 79, Taos Clippings Collection Folder, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>25</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 360.

to call Taos home claimed that the ancient spirituality of the area moved them deeply. Many of them mentioned the sense of peace that they felt there.<sup>26</sup>

Blumenschein and the other early artists held a deep, albeit idealized, respect for the Taos Pueblo people. “The Indians of Taos, pocketed in a northern corner of New Mexico, have resisted all enemies for these many centuries during which they gradually developed the grand little democracy of the Pueblos, self-governing, self-supporting and self-respecting,” Blumenschein explained. “They have been influenced by the northern plains Indians and by the Spaniards, but have always maintained their customs and their religion even until now, when they are struggling against the mighty white race that threatens to swallow them up and spit them out again . . .” Blumenschein criticized the United States Indian policies that had attempted to assimilate Native peoples for over a century.<sup>27</sup> Blumenschein subscribed to the myth that the Indians were a disappearing race, as historian Brian Dippie once noted, “The Indians, this tradition holds, are a vanishing race; they have been wasting away since the day the white man arrived, diminishing in vitality and numbers until, in some not too distant future, no red men will be left on the face of the earth.”<sup>28</sup> The myth certainly led to a nostalgic feeling for the loss of the frontier, no doubt increasing the demand for the paintings emerging from

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Reimagining Indians*, 214-15.

<sup>27</sup> Blumenschein, “The Taos Society of Artists,” Box 1, Folder Scrapbook, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>28</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982), xi.

Taos. “In their executive underground councils the officers elected by the people make rules to counteract all the outside influences that might destroy their traditions, change their native costume, bring a mixture of white blood into the race, upset the beautiful nature worship,” Blumenschein added, “And so far the old wise men have done well. The monthly dances are thanks to their gods above for the corn and the beans; the Pueblo blood is not mixed with white; and more to our particular point, the Indian of Taos wears the clothes of an Indian.” The artist concluded, clearly admiring the culture he depicted so well on his canvases. “We had to write this little about the Pueblo inhabitants, if only to counteract the impression so common in our country that our Indians are not quite respectable.”<sup>29</sup> They took an active role in promoting Pueblo life, which was a major shift, contrasting with decades of cultural assimilation policies.

By capturing the southwestern mystique on their canvases, the Taos artists who were disenchanted with life in mainstream America became visual spokespersons for the West as an alternative to conventional eastern society. For example, Blumenschein’s painting, *Moon, Morning Star, Evening Star*, portrays, in a mystical, surrealistic style, the Pueblo of Taos blending in with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the background, while the people in the foreground are participating in an unusual ceremony involving watermelons and antlered figures encircled by cloaked figures in prayer.<sup>30</sup> The artists

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<sup>29</sup> Blumenschein, “The Taos Society of Artists,” Box 1, Folder Scrapbook, Taos Society of Artists Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>30</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein’s painting *Moon, Morning Star, Evening Star* appears in Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 362.

saw in the Tiwa Pueblo people—their culture, their interaction with the natural world, and their communal society—a viable alternative to the industrialized society prevalent in the East.<sup>31</sup> Native Americans began to symbolize authenticity for the artists and others who turned away from the mechanized existence they saw in those who embraced urbanization.

E. Irving Couse helped to spread these ideas. His paintings sought to explore both the mind and soul of the American Indian; he was deeply drawn in by the spirituality of the land and its inhabitants, although he greatly romanticized the Pueblo Indian people. He created a mythical world. Couse was no mere voyeur; he and his fellow artists were actively involved in advancing anthropological and archaeological studies throughout the Southwest and sought to preserve the rich history and heritage of northern New Mexico.<sup>32</sup>

This was a new way of life for these immigrants, and they freed themselves from the hustle and bustle of the civilized world for months at a time. They embraced Taos as a Walden Pond of the Southwest, receiving inspiration from what was to them true wilderness.<sup>33</sup> Northern New Mexico's distance from industrialized society drew many of the artists to the region. "It was far removed from the last word in civilization, this Taos as I first saw it. But the primitive charm appealed to me. The natural setting of the adobe town is very impressive. The landscape of great plain and high mountains has great beauty and is an unending inspiration to creative people," Blumenschein declared. "The

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<sup>31</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 356-357.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 357-60.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 355.

Indians who live near by [sic] in the large, three-storied pueblos, were an added attraction in many ways. I am not sure it was not the Indian in his blanket, with folds like sculpture, that made me decide to move our Paris furniture, my frontier-fearing wife and one small daughter to this new life so far removed from all the comforts and attractions of great cities.” Although Historian Frederic Jackson Turner had declared in 1893 that the frontier had closed, the frontier could also be imagined as a mental construction that continued for decades after.<sup>34</sup> But that is not quite the entire story, either. In reality, Blumenschein and the other artists likely did not bother with the academically accepted definition of frontier. This was the *frontier*—physically, psychologically, spiritually, culturally—compared with the eastern life they had walked away from. It was the same frontier purchased by art patrons in the East; the frontier truly existed to them, even if only in their imaginations. Regardless of the definition of *frontier*, or the official date of its physical demise, Blumenschein’s family came to greatly appreciate a life far removed from cities. “We made the final change in 1919, having previously bought a rambling one-story adobe house just off the plaza. There began another and most eventful experience for all three of us.”<sup>35</sup> Blumenschein remembered, “The delicate Helen turned into a strong, out-door-loving young woman; the wife changed her dainty boudoir habits

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” In *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894).

<sup>35</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, “Ernest Leonard Blumenschein,” p. 2, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

into a style more becoming to her surroundings without losing her daintiness; and papa immediately became a ‘roughneck’—and liked it.”<sup>36</sup> This attitude was widespread among the newcomers. Below a photograph of painter W. Herbert Dunton wearing full cowboy gear, the Taos-Santa Fe Sun Times reported, “Many artists who came to the Taos-Santa Fe region lost no time in going ‘native.’”<sup>37</sup> Multiple features of rural western life appealed to the newcomers from the East.

Some artists began exporting their radical ideas, through their artwork, soon after their arrival in Taos. Walter Ufer, who arrived from Chicago in 1914, was a revolutionary socialist. He was affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and Leon Trotsky had visited him on his way to Mexico, following his deportation from the Soviet Union. Ufer believed Pueblo culture had characteristics similar to socialism; he painted romantic portrayals of Tiwa people and their society, perceiving it—and ultimately promoting it—as an alternative to capitalism. Blumenschein, too, was particularly aware of the social, cultural, and political inequality of this time, but he was not as politically inclined as Ufer.<sup>38</sup> Taos would prove a breeding ground for new ideas concerning government and society from the early

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<sup>36</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, “Ernest Leonard Blumenschein,” p. 2-3, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>37</sup> *Taos-Santa Fe Sun Times*, “Art News and Views from the Land of Enchantment, For The Years 1900-1945,” Denver Art Museum, souvenir, *Art In New Mexico, 1900-1945*, February 18-April 19, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>38</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 364.

twentieth century forward.<sup>39</sup> These early Taos artists successfully exported their artwork, and consequently their ideas, to the outside world. By 1930, the works of several of these painters had been displayed at the world's most prestigious exhibitions and institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Venice Biennale.<sup>40</sup> They also succeeded in promoting (and proving) the myth of the West as a place of rebirth and freedom from civilization. Blumenschein recalled, "We all began, with enthusiasm that has never dwindled, to produce pictures inspired directly from the fascinating life about us."<sup>41</sup> After dozens of artists had arrived in the region, the land and people continued to inspire them to turn out masterpiece after masterpiece.

The Tiwa residents of Taos Pueblo symbolized freedom for these eastern emigrants. "Whereas Euro-Americans had imprisoned themselves in the logical mind and the social order, Indians represented instinct and freedom," explained historian Philip Deloria. Indians, "spoke for 'the spirit of the continent.' Whites desperately desired that freedom," Deloria noted.<sup>42</sup> Whites could never become Indian, of course, therefore they

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<sup>39</sup> Although Walter Ufer and Ernest Blumenschein were not extremely influential in exporting radical politics from Taos, especially as compared to the later arrivals, they were the first. Ufer and Blumenschein were subtle in promoting their ideas through their artwork. Later writers such as Mabel Dodge Luhan were much more direct, through their literature, and more influential.

<sup>40</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 366.

<sup>41</sup> Ernest L. Blumenschein, "Ernest Leonard Blumenschein," p. 3, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>42</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 3; Interestingly, Deloria is discussing the significance of D.H. Lawrence's perceptions in



could not fully experience the freedom they craved. The Taos artists attempted to capture this enigmatic and elusive characteristic of free Indians and transfer it to their canvases, and, as patrons desired a piece of that freedom for themselves, demand for these paintings soared.

For Blumenschein, the experience of the landscape, combined with his interactions with the people of Taos Pueblo, intertwined to create elements of spiritual significance. “In all my life this was my first tremendous reaction to Nature—and it sank down deep,” Blumenschein wrote. Here, Blumenschein capitalized the “N” in “Nature,” as Muir and the Transcendentalists had done, likening nature with divinity. He continued, “Over a long undulation of sage-brush [sic] desert I could see the trees of a small valley and soon after noon reached the rather squalid Mexican town of Taos. One thing here struck me with particular force, Indians wrapped up in the graceful folds of white sheets; quite Arabian,” Blumenschein recalled of his first encounter with Taos. “I was told the Indian Pueblo of Taos, the five-story pyramidal buildings that housed six hundred people, was three miles from the Mexican town of Taos.”<sup>43</sup> A Chicago newspaper observed that the, “Taos atmosphere seemed to exert an enlivening influence on those who came in contact with it from the first.” Not only did the landscape and the Tiwa people “prove a stimulus to workers in the modern style but it invigorated the followers of academic traditions and enabled them to speak with an authority which has

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this excerpt. Lawrence arrived in Taos many years after some of the artists first relocated their and Lawrence’s views were likely shaped by observing the artists.

<sup>43</sup> Blumenschein, “Part2, Taos,” p. 2, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

made the Taos colony famous throughout the land.”<sup>44</sup> Easterners who could not escape to the West could begin to imagine the region more fully, and escape to it in their imagination, after viewing the exhibitions of the Taos Society of Artists.

Renowned Taos Modernist Howard Cook described Blumenschein’s work in spiritual terms by personifying nature and noting Blumenschein’s perceptiveness. “The painting of Ernest Blumenschein stems directly from his knowledge of, and love for, the Southwest. Stern canyons, great mountain ranges, desert space, have molded the character of this artist who is so sensitively tuned to nature’s moods. These ultimately have shaped the symbols in the manner by which he expresses them on canvas.”<sup>45</sup> Taos painter Dorothy Brett explains that, “painting is a religious experience. To paint anything that is not a deep experience is just to paint, that perhaps is why, in the many works of great painters, there are always the outstanding ones. Those outstanding ones are to me the ‘moments’ when a deep religious experience was transferred to canvas, and held forever in line and colour.”<sup>46</sup> Art critics almost universally agree that Blumenschein was an outstanding artist and his many masterpieces are highly sought. “Altogether,” Cook continues, “the total of Blumenschein’s work constitutes a convincing record of great

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<sup>44</sup> Blumenschein, “Part2, Taos,” p. 1, Box 6, Folder 7, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>45</sup> Howard Cook, “Introduction,” *New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts State College New Mexico Retrospective Show*, December, 1958, Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 10, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

value to true regional culture of the Southwest. Today this artist's stature is secure justification of his fortitude and faith during a half-century of his artistic growth in this, his beloved land."<sup>47</sup> Blumenschein's love of the Southwest and Taos in particular was shared by others, including another transplanted middle class refuge from the East, Mabel Dodge Luhan.

Mabel Dodge Luhan was responsible for its persistence and for attracting some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century to Taos—artists, writers, photographers, and intellectuals. One cannot overestimate the importance of Luhan for the Taos arts scene or the Southwest in general. She helped create the image of the Southwest in many people's imaginations. Although she was unimpressed on her arrival, she soon changed that view dramatically, declaring the Southwest a region of great mystical power. Mabel Dodge Luhan, like the Taos artists, was deeply touched by the spirituality of both the people and the landscape. She claimed to have undergone profound spiritual changes and to have found harmony and inner peace after she moved to northern New Mexico. Mabel Dodge Luhan left her frenetic life in New York, where she had been involved in radical politics and counted among friends, radical intellectuals such as Gertrude Stein, Max Eastman, Walter Lippman, and anarchist Emma Goldman. After she moved to Taos in 1918, she soon married a Tiwa of Taos Pueblo, Tony Luhan, with whom she would remain for the rest of her life. She did not, however, join her new husband in the pueblo itself; rather, she built a sprawling adobe house just outside town, adjoining Taos Pueblo land.

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<sup>47</sup> Cook, "Introduction," Box 6, Folder 6, Ernest L. Blumenschein Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

Although she viewed herself initially as a muse for other writers, eventually she proved to be a prolific author in her own right, publishing six books within the span of a single decade. The influential people she persuaded to visit the region helped promote the Southwestern experience to the general public. These figures included D.H. Lawrence, Mary Austin, John Collier, and Georgia O’Keeffe.<sup>48</sup> Their impressions have influenced America’s counterculture for nearly a century. Luhan hoped friends’ writing and artwork would persuade the U.S. to deviate from its destructive course. The ripples in art, literature, and thought expanded out from the Taos epicenter throughout the Southwest and across the continent.<sup>49</sup>

Mabel Dodge Luhan was an extremely complex person. “Mabel herself was a mass of contradictions,” her friend Dorothy Brett wrote. “Mabel was and always will be heavily criticized,” Brett elaborated. “Her memoirs show her ruthlessness, to her friends and to her enemies and to herself, I think she must have bitterly resented being born,” Brett concluded. “Life among people had to be endured, people had not brought to her the things she expected, so she made around herself, beautiful houses, and beautiful gardens. Her real enjoyment lay in her environment,” Brett explained.<sup>50</sup> It makes sense, then, that she would eventually settle in a region with the aesthetic appeal of Taos. In this regard, it is likely Mabel Dodge Luhan never fully broke free from her gender role.

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Reimagining Indians*, 187-88

<sup>49</sup> Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 354

<sup>50</sup> Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 1, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Throughout her life, she focused much of her energy on her home and her homemaking skills. “At rock bottom Mabel was a loyal friend,” Brett stressed, even though, she acknowledged that, “on the bored, impatient surface there was this recurring irritation, impatience and boredom of everything and everybody.”<sup>51</sup> D.H. Lawrence and others similarly described the contradictory traits of Mabel Dodge Luhan. She tended to annoy people, to put it bluntly, although she was highly intelligent and extremely perceptive, especially in response to the beauty in her surroundings.

Mabel Dodge was in such a hurry to see Taos for the first time that she left her husband Maurice behind to pack his paints and other artist supplies, foreshadowing a divorce that would soon follow. On her arrival, she left orders with a variety of stores throughout Santa Fe and expected deliveries every week. She explained later, “for I felt one wouldn’t be able to buy *anything* up in that village, far away from the railroad. I even ordered dry things, like coffee and sugar and cereals! It seemed to me I was going into the wilderness and leaving the world behind me, and I loved that, for it was a new thing to feel.”<sup>52</sup> Although Taos certainly did not fit the dictionary definition of wilderness, it seemed like wilderness to Luhan when she compared it to the bourgeois, highly-populated areas she had lived in or visited. Historian Roderick Nash, for example,

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<sup>51</sup> Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 7, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>52</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert: An Escape from Reality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 71.

once observed that, “One man’s wilderness may be another man’s picnic ground.”<sup>53</sup>

Luhan had heard about Taos and she was ready for a drastic change.

Mabel Dodge was overwhelmed by nature’s sights as she neared Taos. “I looked up at the hills that rose on either side of me. They were dotted with dark, deep, green cedars and the pinkish earth showed between. Along the canyon the branches of cottonwood trees were a film of gray lace, tinged with lavender: the most wintry trees I had ever seen,” she marveled. “The river moved slowly here, profound and silent. Clumps of red willows melted into the shore line, and some way up ahead, yellow spires of sandstone suddenly thrust their peaks into the Ionian blue of the sky.”<sup>54</sup> She reacted to the awe inspiring beauty she never witnessed before. “‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’ I exclaimed to myself. ‘Lord God Almighty!’ I felt a sudden recognition of the reality of natural life that was so strong and so unfamiliar that it made me feel unreal. I caught a fleeting glimpse of my own spoiled and distorted nature, seen against the purity and freshness of these undomesticated surroundings. . . .”<sup>55</sup> She was humbled by nature’s backdrop.

Mabel Dodge enthusiastically described her arrival. “We reached the high desert of Taos Valley at twilight and saw the sacred mountain, twenty miles away, standing out in startling bright distinctness, lighted by a sun that had already sunk below the horizon. The snow patches on the three peaks of the bow-shaped crest were transparently pink,

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<sup>53</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

and all the deep flanks of the southern slopes were purple plum color,” she recalled, remembering every detail, which had been forever painted on the canvas of her memory. “The low light of the dusk made the shapes like pyramids stand out so clearly the range seemed made up of cones, piled one upon the other. Very huge and splendid it was. In the high sky over it, a few rosy clouds floated; the pale blue sky seemed still and peaceful, bearing breathlessly the soft, warm, pale clouds over the massive, voluminous earth beneath it,” she recalled. “Looking at this definite sudden, precise earth-form that towered there so still, I saw something again that I had never noticed before in nature. It seemed to me the mountain was alive, awake, and breathing. That it had its own consciousness. That it knew things,” she recalled.<sup>56</sup> In the nineteenth century. Thoreau had experienced a remarkably similar interaction with a mountain. Mabel Dodge continued, “If I needed John or some man beside me to enable me to be somebody with a valid, objective existence, this mountain was Itself with no outside aid. ‘I am I’ the mountain breathed to me—or so it seemed. ‘I am what I am—nothing can add to me or take away from me my own being. But it is because I am a part of all the rest of Nature,’” she felt, as William James had discussed in his definition of mystical experience, that nature was communicating with her. “The mountain seemed to smile and breathe forth an infinitely peaceful, benevolent blessing as the light faded away from it.”<sup>57</sup> She capitalized the “N” in “Nature” following in the tradition of Ernest

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

Blumenschein, John Muir, and the Transcendentalists, clearly seeing and describing the divinity she felt around her.

Like the Taos artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan felt that the culture of the Pueblo Indian people was far superior to industrial society, that they were in tune with the mystical aspects she had recently come to experience, and that the Pueblo people and their way of life could one day save America. Many artists and writers who subsequently came to the region held similar views.<sup>58</sup> They thought they had discovered the solution to eastern problems in the West.<sup>59</sup> By the 1930s, Luhan and others saw in Indian cultures a vision for the future. They argued that rapid modernization and industrialization and the lack of concern for spiritual matters had eroded American society. For them, the Indians and their cultures offered a safe haven from the effects of industrialization. Indian people had a rich tradition of creating beautiful arts and crafts, an admirable sense of community, and they lived a highly-spiritual existence worthy of emulation. Mabel Dodge Luhan and other antimodernists who found inspiration in the West were not simply escaping from the problems of modern America; through their literature they were hoping to influence others, thus changing the areas of society that they found problematic.<sup>60</sup>

The views of Mabel Dodge Luhan and other writers about the people of the Pueblos soon became part of American public consciousness. Although these writers and

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<sup>58</sup> Smith, *Reimagining Indians*, 188.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 5-6.



artists sought to help the Pueblo Indian people by actively promoting Indian arts and crafts and Native religious freedom, their romantic paintings and literary portraits of Southwestern American Indian people glorified Native cultures and, paradoxically, reinforced cultural differences. By the early twentieth century, the general public began to adopt the notion of “authentic and traditional” Native Americans as “ageless, changeless, primitive people.”<sup>61</sup> Romanticized perceptions suggesting all Native Americans were “at one with nature” and “deeply spiritual, mystical and feminist oriented” became stereotypes of native peoples.<sup>62</sup> Many people came to believe that all Native Americans think and act alike and are much different from white people. These ideas would eventually exert a profound influence on the New Age movement as well as the hippies.<sup>63</sup>

Mabel Dodge did not study Pueblo culture solely from a distance, though; Tony Luhan became not only her husband but her spiritual tutor and mentor as well. Her good friend Dorothy Brett summarized Tony Luhan’s style by relating a brief story about an experience she had had with him. “One night at dinner at Mabel’s, in the big house, she had some people, one of them was considered to be an important Mystic, of which he was fully aware. So during dinner he began to talk high and wide about mysticism, the moon, and so on. Tony sat at the end of the table in solid silence,” Brett recalled. “Then the man turned to him and asked him if he knew anything of what he was talking about.

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<sup>61</sup> Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters*, 181.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 185.

Tony looked at him, and replied in his slow, impressive Indian way, ‘yes, we know all those things, about the moon too, but we do not talk about them,’” Tony replied. “The squelch was so complete, that the conversation drifted towards the problems of living in New Mexico.”<sup>64</sup> Despite the chasm that separated them culturally, most observers agreed that Mabel and Tony were, oddly, a well-matched couple.

Mabel Dodge Luhan once asked Tony what the religion of the Indians was, desiring to mimic it more in her own life. He answered, “Life.”<sup>65</sup> At some point Mabel Dodge Luhan began to live more fully, through a state of reverence for life, which she learned from watching and living with her new husband, and she realized, “I’d rather be a part of this Indian thing than anything I’ve ever seen.” She then lived the rest of her life accordingly, attempting to integrate the wisdom she was acquiring. She knew, though, that she would ultimately remain an outsider. “The Indians, inside their magical circle, did not even seem to know we were there. They did not exclude you, they did not have to: we were, in reality, not THERE where they were. We did not know what they knew, nor experience their mystical communion which was as natural and inevitable as the communion between the cells of the body, and similar to that,” she explained. “No,” she concluded, “lonely atoms like us could never participate in their rich, shared,

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<sup>64</sup> Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 3, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>65</sup> Tony Luhan in Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 199.

companioned being.”<sup>66</sup> Luhan recognized that she would never fully be a part of the Taos Pueblo culture.

As Luhan observed Pueblo dancers flowing effortlessly, she pondered how white people attempted to connect in the way Indians did but found it a futile endeavor. “We form dancing classes, we try to do things in groups, we strive for group consciousness, trying to raise our vibrations . . . desperate, like cold flies at the end of the solar year, crawling separately up the frigid, unfriendly walls of our cooling spiritual universe. But it is all no good,” the expatriate expounded. “We have reached the last outpost . . . Our solar year is ending. We will give out and fall to the floor of the world and be swept away.” she surmised. “Some such thoughts as these ran through my head as I watched the Indians dance through the hours.”<sup>67</sup> As she watched them dance she felt dismal and envious. After it ended she was surprised that she felt made over, “Renewed, refreshed, filled with life.”<sup>68</sup> She saw value in Pueblo life that transcended the mere beauty she observed in their dances.

Tony Luhan and Mabel Dodge Luhan believed that Pueblo culture held the key to the future and that white, capitalist, industrialized society was in decline. “God give white people things and Indians watch them go under them. You know. Wheel turning.” Tony made a large, round, turning gesture to imitate a wheel turning. “So many things carry the wheel down, with the white people underneath. Pretty soon Indians come up

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 67.

again. Indians' turn next."<sup>69</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan recalled, "Right from the beginning, I had the power to see into his mind and catch the pictures he saw, and so now I saw the huge wheel turning slowly, weighted down with all the accretions of our civilization: the buildings and machinery, the multitudinous objects we had invented and collected about us, and ourselves fairly buried under the heavy load, muffled, stifled, going under." She explained, "On the other side of the wheel, rising bare-limbed and free, heads up bound with green leaves, sheaves of corn and wheat across their shoulders, this dark race mounting." She could picture what he was describing and she understood the point he was trying to convey. "The time to come is his," she thought, "and he knows it." She had come to agree with him and, having personally participated in both lifestyles, she now thought it would be a positive change.<sup>70</sup> Tony and his Tiwa people signified authenticity for Mabel Dodge Luhan and the writers she invited to Taos. For her, their status as the original people of the Americas and their closeness to nature meant they personified the authentic. She had experience the inauthentic during her life in the East as well as overseas, where she had attempted to impress her friends; by contrast, she found northern New Mexico refreshing and comforting.

Many aspects of Mabel Dodge Luhan's civilized life dropped away as she embraced an entirely different existence. "Soon after sunrise I was up before the others and standing in the cold water, bathing. It was so good to be down to the essentials of living and to find them as delicious as they were. In all my days I had never lived like

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<sup>69</sup> Tony Luhan in Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 197.

<sup>70</sup> Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 197.

this. I was loath to leave the pleasant refreshing water,” she explained, “so I collected the garments I had worn during these last days and I scrubbed them with my cake of soap, standing in midstream in the brown clear ripple, with my gingham skirts turned up and pinned at the back.” She enjoyed the solitude and the invigoratingly cool water. “I splashed and whacked the wet clothes together and wrung them out. I got wet and liked it. When I turned to wade out, I saw Tony sitting on the bank, laughing. This made me feel how much friendliness there was in the morning; the early sunshine, the fresh cool water, the freedom and ease and Tony laughing in such a kindly amusement,” She, like John Muir, found freedom in this new lifestyle. “I have never yet seen the mean, malicious laughter of the world upon his face, never anything but the jovial laughter the gods used to show mankind.”<sup>71</sup> She was impressed at how Tony always seemed to possess an attitude of wonder and joy.

Mabel Dodge Luhan held Taos Pueblo Indians in high regard, while she felt disdain toward those of Spanish descent. She considered the Indians, “children of the earth,” and she valued their life-giving religion in which they were, “so well mothered in the uterine kivas.” By contrast, Luhan said of the Hispanic population, “That the country remains about as they found it, that they themselves are still held and bound in time and do not progress but are gradually running down a little more each year, would make an interesting study of the arresting influence of untransformed sadism—for the strongest

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 329.

passions in those pioneers were greed and cruelty.”<sup>72</sup> She considered Catholicism a fear and power-based religion and felt contempt for its followers. “They were full of fear, of various fears, and all of their own making. These Spaniards were alone in a wilderness both within and without.” She added, “They were afraid of themselves and of their own perversion, and their religious symbols are the symbols of this fear.”<sup>73</sup>

One such symbol, Santos, was popular throughout New Mexico. These wooden carvings were often created by the Penitente Brotherhood and she found them more than interesting, declaring, “they are moving. They win our respect and sometimes your awe, for we know we are faced by the peculiar terribleness of the dynamic psyche forcing itself into material.”<sup>74</sup> We see the birth of an art in these Santos, the first primitive impulse of the soul to picture itself into release.” She pondered their desire for freedom and decided that it had been too weak. “Had the impulse been strong enough, it might have carried our Mexican colonists out into freedom. But it lapsed within them and they became more intuned and lost to the outside world. For a brief period only they created,

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<sup>72</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, “The Santos of New Mexico,” p. 127, Mabel Dodge Luhan Correspondence and Essays, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

<sup>73</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, “The Santos of New Mexico,” p. 128, Mabel Dodge Luhan Correspondence and Essays, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

<sup>74</sup> However, the people in the region, disconnected from their homeland, likely utilized these Santos much as they used the Virgin Mary, who provided a sense of nationalism, connection, and protection. Historian Linda Hall says the image of the Virgin, “aided those in what is now the U.S. Southwest who saw their power and significance and access to land and resources diminished by the U.S. victory in the Mexican-American War.” Linda B. Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 292.

and from them we get these sensitive, suffering Santos: the curious offspring of a most cruelly-inclined race of men.”<sup>75</sup> Luhan blamed the Spaniards for attempting to enslave Pueblo Indians and strip them of the religious beliefs she so admired. “Nothing has happened to carry them forward,” she observed. “They are as their fathers were when they came and built the houses, these twentieth-century primitives still dwell in. They are preserved, or rather, arrested, within the circle of the repetitive compulsion: the wheel of fate which they are bound.”<sup>76</sup> They held themselves in bondage, according to Luhan, but they lacked the courage to break free and challenge the generations of belief that chained them.

On an earlier occasion, Mabel Dodge compared Anglo and Indian ways of interacting. She, her husband Maurice, and their friend stopped to look at some beautiful scenery on her first trip to the Taos Pueblo and were overcome by pleasant feelings. But, their serenity evaporated quickly. “The moment we were all in the car together again, the ease was gone, for on the invisible stage where we lived and had our being, our spirits clutched at each other and we strangled freedom. All three of us, entangled together, were tensed in strange and subtle ways, and strove both to grasp at and repel the others’ claims on life.” While they had experienced freedom, which she attributed to the marvelous landscape, their old ways soon took over and they strangled it. “It was too

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<sup>75</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, “The Santos of New Mexico,” p. 128, Mabel Dodge Luhan Correspondence and Essays, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

<sup>76</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, “The Santos of New Mexico,” p. 130, Mabel Dodge Luhan Correspondence and Essays, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

bad—for all about us, out there in the Pueblo, there was a free and easy mode of life that we could see and smell and almost touch, that we might emulate, only we did not know how, for we did not know what elements it was made of.”<sup>77</sup> She thought emulating Pueblo culture could free a society that was ailing.

After undergoing a spiritual transformation, Mabel Dodge Luhan lamented the days she had wasted chasing freedom in various ways, hoping to escape from herself, while each had led her more deeply into bondage. She recalled, “never feeling *real* except when lost and oblivious in some ‘love-affair’; or else in drink or drugs, trying to find the stimulation that doesn’t arise naturally in one’s own depths.” She pondered how widespread this way of being was throughout the world. “How many of us had depended upon our vicious satisfactions, going from one stimulant to another, never daring to be alone because nothing happened inside one, escaping the horrible stillness and emptiness and immobility of the soul?” She realized she was hardly alone in her futile attempts to free her soul. “How many of those I had known were like myself? I had been constantly under the influence of external stimulants and unable to get along without them! Dependent upon them. That was what made them vices.” Now she realized the childlike nature of her past but she also understood the difficulty she had in breaking away until she arrived in Taos. “And even those, like friends close to me, who had not been of the vacillating, inconstant, changeable type, who had been wedded to one, true to one, unable to get away, bound hand and foot, surely they had been no less vicious persons than those whose solutions seemed to lie in new excitements. It was neurosis just the same,

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<sup>77</sup> Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 96.



servitude, the infantilism that prevented them from coming to ripeness, to freedom in maturity.”<sup>78</sup> The Taos Indians, and her husband Tony, were not bound as she had been. “There did not seem to be that kind of habitual and inevitable weakness in Tony.” She continued, “He wasn’t enslaved. He belonged to a subjugated race but somehow he was free in himself, and his people were free in comparison with their conquerors.”<sup>79</sup> She saw irony in the fact that multiple groups had sought to conquer, enslave, or assimilate the Indians of the Taos Pueblo yet they grasped a greater freedom than their conquerors.

While still in New York, Mabel Dodge had declared that she needed a vacation and joked that she might be going to Atlantis. She might as well have gone to Atlantis because she could have no way of knowing about the profound change Taos would have on her psyche. “Well, I want a vacation,” She said to herself. “I’ve had a horrid time lately. I feel like a Change.” It is interesting that she capitalized the “C” in “Change;” she would later claim that the divine were at work in bringing about her impending transformation. “I got it. My life broke in two right then, and I entered into the second half, a new world that replaced all the ways I had known with others, more strange and terrible and sweet than any I had ever been able to imagine. Whether it was to Atlantis I went or not I do not know, nor have I ever been interested in conjecturing about it.” She did not need to try to understand what was happening, she just enjoyed it. “I suppose when one gets to heaven one does not speculate about it any more. And the same must be true of hell. Anyway, I was through with reading books about Atlantis,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 278.

Rosicrucianism, the Seven Worlds of Theosophy, or about any other mythical things. I entered into a new life that they were concerned with and I was done with reading any books for a long time.”<sup>80</sup> In Taos, she had many personal mystical experiences and no longer needed to read or philosophize about them.

Mabel Dodge Luhan’s ideas and writings often reflected spiritual thought. She believed that either a kind spirit lived in the nearby mountains or the Indians who had lived there for many centuries had imprinted their warm spirit on the land. She also believed the tribal consciousness of the Tiwa people and their relationship with the earth were key ingredients to the peace she experienced. In *Intimate Memories*, a passionate account of her spiritual awakening, Luhan explained how her dormant heart had been slowly awakened by Tony Luhan and the mountainous landscape of the Taos region, leading her to attain a more peaceful and happy existence than she had ever known. Tony guided her toward a mystical union with the natural world. She found her authentic self for the first time. Taos did indeed have this powerful impact on many outsiders; numerous artists and writers claimed rebirths and conversions during the twentieth century.<sup>81</sup>

Mabel Dodge Luhan noted that D.H. Lawrence had called the country “pristine” and she could find no other word that described it so well. “There was a quality in the air, in the spirit of the place, that was more congenial to him than any he ever found in Europe, Asia, or Australia,” she explained. It had the same effect on other individuals

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>81</sup> Jane Nelson, *Mabel Dodge Luhan* (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1982), 25-27.

who visited Taos. “For it also awakens them, stimulates them, makes them more essential it reveals their buried life . . . it excites them, making them realize the color, taste, sight or sound of unspoiled natural life, almost forgotten in cities.” She felt divine forces were at work which, along the lines of William James’ definition of mystical experience, overpowers and transforms. “And sometimes it overwhelms them, causing the balance to be lost, when horror at their own ruin is at last perceived in the clear light of these high altitudes, and they realize they have come too late to such a happy land.” She saw a, “man shudder and shrink away from himself and what had been done to him out there in the world before he stumbled into Taos.”<sup>82</sup> She understood this well because she had experienced it herself and witnessed it many times within other escapees from the eastern U.S.

Mabel Dodge Luhan’s religious beliefs were ineffable; she never directly laid them out for inspection, either in writing or verbally, it seems, but it is clear that divinity and mysticism played a major role during the second half of her life. Her friend, Dorothy Brett pondered the question, “Was Mabel a religious woman?” Brett explained, “She professed no particular beliefs, as far as I know, yet she was responsible for handing over to me many books on Mysticism, esoteric matters, she would say “this is just your dish” and so it was. We never seemed to discuss the books or mysticism or religion, but any book that touched on India, Lamas, Mahatmas, she would hand to me.” Brett recalled, “She also handed Arnold’s book on Cochise, which I read and re-read while we were

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<sup>82</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, “Lawrence of New Mexico,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

taking the waters at Ojo Caliente. She knew and understood so much more about me instinctively than most people. We read for hours, on winter afternoons. Mabel was not much of a talker, at her own parties she hardly talked at all.”<sup>83</sup> Mabel, though, was an instigator. Brett recalled, “she certainly has a devastating perception whether, through the eye or the ear or the instinct, I don’t know, but for her, all our houses are made of glass.”<sup>84</sup> Her friends often commented on her intuition and incredible gifts in her ability to perceive.

Mabel Dodge Luhan was an enigmatic woman and will remain so. She realized her enigmatic nature and knew that she was also full of contradictions. She marveled at her husband, Tony’s, patience with her. “What made him so patient with me? I have never known, unless it was that he accepted the bitter with the good in a situation that from the beginning he recognized as arranged by God for a purpose hidden from us both. There was always that deep conviction in it for us both and possibly we did, after all, have our sense of inevitability.”<sup>85</sup> They each believed, from their first meeting, that fate intended them to be a couple and that surely aided their ability to work through their problems.

Mabel Dodge Luhan and Tony agreed on most things but they disagreed about his use of Peyote. Tony explained to her that it had been used traditionally by his people

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<sup>83</sup> Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 3, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>84</sup> Brett, untitled essay about Mabel Dodge Luhan, p. 10, Dorothy Brett Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>85</sup> Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 283.

in the past but it had recently returned, as a visitor. “I was anxious to get on with the meaning and use of peyote in the Taos Pueblo,” she explained, “because it seemed to be a terribly important issue between us, perhaps actually the most important adjustment we had to make.” Tony elaborated, “Now nearly ever’body in our village has tried the Peyote sometimes . . . He is so powerful! He cure the sick people, He give us songs, He show us wonderful things like colors we never see before. And some people see God. Once Enrique see Jesus. It was the first time he came to the meetin’, for he be against Him.” Enrique had not been a believer in Jesus and had never been to a Peyote meeting. Jesus often plays a major role in the Native American Church. Enrique went to a Peyote meeting, poking fun at Jesus, “Then he come, laughin’ at Him, just for fun, he said. Then he see Jesus. He cry.” Tony held a peyote button and “stared at the little god in the palm of his hand.” Mabel urged, “Well—what do you do at the meeting?”<sup>86</sup> Tony explained in rather elaborate detail the ceremonial singing and drumming that occurred at a peyote meeting. He added, “Sometimes they bring a sick person in, maybe someone *very* sick, burnin’ up, or can’t walk, and then they boil the Peyote in fresh water and give it to drink. That sick person get up well in the morning. I see it many times. I see the lame one get up and walk home, and I see the fever get out of the burnin’ body and that person all cool and damp. Wonderful.”<sup>87</sup> Mabel argued, “I’m scared of the peyote. I have seen it once in New York. It made someone crazy.” Tony looked puzzled, and maintained, “You just got to do it right . . . or perhaps the Peyote get mad. Just think . . .

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 288-89.

how beautiful the singin' when the Peyote Himself give the songs! Then it get better and better all night till the mornin' star rise over the mountain and we can see him come. Then the Water Chief bring us fresh water to drink, and we eat and our food is better than ever."<sup>88</sup>

Peyote had become an important part of Tony's life and it was part of his religion. "All we know is how good, how happy, the life is. We been prayin' all night, prayin' to the God in the Peyote, and He is with us now. So we go home and sleep, rememberin' what we saw." Tony continued, "You came to see me; I sleepin'. Happy. Why you have to be scared?" Mabel exclaimed, "Oh, Tony! I am still scared. It seems to me you go away from yourself when you eat *peyote*; you lose yourself. That frightens me." Tony countered, gently, "And seem to me I find myself more and more . . . "<sup>89</sup> It is unclear if the couple came to an agreement about Tony's participation in Peyote meetings. It is telling that she chose to include this interaction in such detail in her memoirs and the fact that their exchange ended with Tony speaking positively about his experiences suggests he may have won this particular battle.

It would be difficult to overstate Mabel Dodge Luhan's impact on Taos and the Southwest. D.H. Lawrence traveled to Taos at her urging. She intended to serve as his muse as he wrote the great epic story of Taos to share with the nation. Although he did not meet her expectations, he did, indeed, fall in love with the region. Mabel Dodge Luhan gave Lawrence's wife, Frieda, a one hundred and sixty acre ranch in the foothills

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

and Tony taught Frieda and D.H. to ride horses. “There is something savage, unbreakable in the spirit of the place out here,” Lawrence said of the ranch.<sup>90</sup> After she lured him to New Mexico, she expected him to write a book about it. “She felt as did the Pueblo Indians that the heartbeat of the world is in New Mexico,” explained George Fitzpatrick, editor and friend of D.H. Lawrence.<sup>91</sup>

Lawrence exclaimed that New Mexico was the greatest experience he ever had. “It certainly changed me forever,” he elaborated. “Curious as it may sound, it was New Mexico that liberated me from the present era of material and mechanical development. Months spent in holy Kandy, in Ceylon, the holy of holies of southern Buddaism [sic], had not touched the great psyche of materialism and idealism which dominated me.” He echoed Muir and Luhan in praising his liberation from the industrializing East. Lawrence had traveled the world seeking a spiritual experience and had not found it until he arrived in northern New Mexico.<sup>92</sup> Lawrence wrote an article for *Survey Graphic*, a magazine dedicated to cultural and social issues, in which he articulated his impressions of the high desert country, the Indians, and their way of life.<sup>93</sup> “But the moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fe, something stood still in my

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<sup>90</sup> D.H. Lawrence, Undated letter to Catherine Carswell, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>91</sup> George Fitzpatrick, “D.H. Lawrence Country,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>92</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 2, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>93</sup> George Fitzpatrick, “D.H. Lawrence Country,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

soul, and I started to attend. . . . In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new.”<sup>94</sup> His thoughts and words mirror those of Mabel Dodge Luhan, whose life “broke in two” upon her arrival in the transformative region.

D.H. Lawrence had searched the globe for something he would find religious. “The simple piety of some English people, the semi-pagan mystery of some Catholics in southern Italy, the intensity of some Bavarian peasants, the semi-ecstasy of Buddhists or Brahmins: all this had seemed religious all right, as far as the parties concerned were involved, but it didn’t involve me. I looked on at their religiousness from the outside,” he realized. He found that it was far easier to love religion than to *feel* religion.<sup>95</sup> “I had no permanent feeling of religion till I came to New Mexico and penetrated into the old human race-experience here,” Lawrence maintained. “It is curious that one should get a sense of living religion from the Red Indians, having failed to get it from Hindus or Sicilian Catholics or Cinghalese.”<sup>96</sup> He elaborated, describing the elements he found so beautiful. “It was a vast old religion, greater than anything we know: more darkly and nakedly religious. There is no God, no conception of a god. All is God. But it is not the

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<sup>94</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 2, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.; George Fitzpatrick, “D.H. Lawrence Country,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>95</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 3, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>96</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 4, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.



pantheism we are accustomed to, which expresses itself as ‘god is everywhere, God is in everything.’” Lawrence seemed to understand the religion of his pueblo neighbors intimately as he, himself, felt overwhelmed by the majesty of the natural world all around him. “In the oldest religion, everything was alive, not supernaturally but naturally alive. There were only deeper and deeper streams of life, vibrations of life, more and more vast.”<sup>97</sup> He realized how different this was from the cities in the East, while recognizing what was happening to this culture he embraced. “But there it is: the newest democracy ousting the oldest religion! And once the oldest religion, which comes down to us from man’s pre-war days, will start again. The sky scraper will scatter on the winds like thistledown, and the genuine America, the America of New Mexico, will start on its course again. This is an interregnum.”<sup>98</sup> Like Mabel Dodge and Tony Luhan, Lawrence thought Pueblo life held the keys to overcoming the problems associated with industrialization and would soon naturally eclipse modernizing society.

D.H. Lawrence began to pull away from the civilized life he had known as he settled into his new New Mexico home. “At present I don’t write—don’t want to—don’t care. Things are all far away. I haven’t seen a newspaper for two months, and can’t bear to think of one. The world is as it is. I am as I am. We don’t fit very well.”<sup>99</sup> This was

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<sup>97</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 7, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>98</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” p. 8, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>99</sup> D.H. Lawrence, letter to Catherine Carswell, from Del Monte Ranch, Questa, New Mexico, 18 May 1924, D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

not simply a depressed disinterest in life, Lawrence felt free from the bondage of newspapers and the trappings of his previous life. In an essay entitled “Lawrence of New Mexico,” Mabel Dodge Luhan summed it up, “Of all places where he lived I know he loved Taos best for did he not tell me so, and write it many times, too, when he was far away? How he longed to come back here, and had he been able, perhaps he would be alive today.”<sup>100</sup>

Lawrence’s health deteriorated during his travel as a result of tuberculosis, and while he was away he wrote of his desire to return to New Mexico. He thought he would heal best in Taos’ climate, immersed in its beauty. It had become the place he felt most at home. She concluded, “He always felt its magic.”<sup>101</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan appreciated D.H. Lawrence’s non-traditional thinking. “No, there was no one like Lawrence before or since his brief years here: no one like him for making all things new. His genius lay in his capacity for being, a capacity so few people seem to have. To comfort oneself for the absence of him one tries to believe that perhaps he was a forerunner,” she hoped, “the first sample of the type to come, of those who will defeat industrialism and the mechanization of life, and who will lead humanity back out of the impasse where it perishes now.”<sup>102</sup> Luhan, like D.H. Lawrence, gravitated toward a simpler lifestyle and away from modernity and industrialization.

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<sup>100</sup> Luhan, “Lawrence of New Mexico,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Luhan, “Lawrence of New Mexico,” D. H. Lawrence Papers, Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

Mabel Dodge Luhan also persuaded John Collier to visit Taos; Collier, too, became enamored with the area and its people and later became Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Although some of his policies remain controversial, especially the forced livestock reduction on the Navajo Nation, he became one of the strongest and the most influential defenders of Indian rights the world has known.<sup>103</sup> John Collier had worked as an adult educator and social worker in 1920, when he received a letter from Mabel Dodge, a bohemian friend he had socialized with in Greenwich Village. She invited him to visit Taos, New Mexico. “Because he no longer visualized ‘the occidental ethos and genius as being the hope of the world,’” historian Kenneth Philp noted, “Collier became curious about Dodge’s letter which described ‘a magical habitation’ of Pueblo Indians: he decided to investigate it for himself.”<sup>104</sup> The snow fell on what seemed a magical landscape as he arrived in late 1920.

Tony Luhan introduced John Collier to his friends, took him into Indian homes, and Collier watched the Red Deer Dance and other Christmas activities, mesmerized by the beauty of the ceremonies and the environs. “These powerful religious dances and the

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<sup>103</sup> For example, tribal governments were formed under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. However, John Collier has been the target for historians’ debates and many Navajo people still have great disdain for the man. The federal government, in a charge led by John Collier, argued that Navajo reservation was severely overgrazed which was damaging the land. Eventually, roughly eighty percent of Navajo livestock was forcibly slaughtered by the U.S. Government which had a devastating effect on the Navajo economy and culture. Although Collier thought he had good intentions, his idealism was overpowered by his ignorance about the Navajo people and the region’s environmental history as well as his own ego, and he is usually remembered as a villain in Navajo oral histories.

<sup>104</sup> Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier’s Crusade for Indian Reform: 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 1.

dramatic physical beauty of northern New Mexico had a profound impact upon Collier; he believed he had discovered a 'Red Atlantis' which held secrets desperately needed by the white world." While employed as a social worker in New York, Collier had labored determinedly, yet unsuccessfully, in an attempt to solve the problems he saw growing within American society. "Mabel Dodge was correct, he thought: Pueblo Indian life did possess a mystical social significance . . . He was convinced that the integrated social organizations at the pueblo offered an example of the community life that had eluded him while a social worker in New York City."<sup>105</sup> In the cities where he had worked, he had witnessed rampant greed coupled with its seemingly unavoidable counterpart, widespread poverty, "These Indians maintained the attribute, lost in the white world, of communal and cooperative experience . . . they had discovered a way to become both 'communists and individualists at one and the same time.'"<sup>106</sup> In New Mexico, Collier felt he had discovered the answers to the questions which had plagued him. "Collier thought he had found on the New Mexico frontier a solution to the question of whether materialism and selfish individualism would dominate and destroy man. He concluded that Pueblo culture offered a model for the redemption of American society because it concerned itself very little with the material aspect of life." On the contrary, Collier observed, "its goals were beauty, adventure, joy, comradeship, and the connection of man with God."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 3

For many decades, the United States Indian policy had consisted of Americanization, individualization, and Christianization.<sup>108</sup> “Into this scene came John Collier, with a radically different approach to the Indian question. Not only was he a strong advocate of protecting and guaranteeing Indian rights to their own religion and culture, but he saw in the communal existence of the Native Americans a model for reforming society at large.”<sup>109</sup> When he became commissioner of Indian Affairs, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he led the “Indian New Deal,” fought tirelessly for Indian rights and Indian self-determination, and he rigorously altered federal Indian policy.<sup>110</sup> By 1936, however, Mabel Dodge Luhan and John Collier disagreed about a number of issues. She supported suppressing the use of peyote, for example, while he argued for Indian religious freedom. He believed that her hostilities, though, stemmed from her

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<sup>108</sup> Historian Cathleen Cahill observed that the federal government’s assimilation policy was instituted during the reconstruction period following the Civil War and continued through 1930. Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 15-20.

<sup>109</sup> Philp, *John Collier’s Crusade for Indian Reform*, xi.

<sup>110</sup> Historian Marsha Weisiger also notes that the Navajo people regard Collier as an enemy. Additionally, she observes, “In designing men as head of household, Fryer and Collier followed a path laid out by earlier policymakers with the BIA, who, as a rule, endeavored to transform native women from agricultural producers and hide processors into good American housewives. Collier challenged the principle of cultural assimilation that governed Indian affairs, but he never questioned its patriarchal underpinnings.” Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), chapter nine, endnote thirty.

wish to acquire more land, which she thought he was blocking with some of his policies.<sup>111</sup>

Mabel Dodge Luhan's words and ideas, as well as those of the people she persuaded to visit Taos, reached and influenced people throughout the country for many decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of hippies settled in communes scattered throughout the Taos region and expanded on the model of freedom laid out by the Taos Society of Artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, D.H. Lawrence, and John Collier. They, too, were drawn to the area because of its distinctive landscape and its rich multi-cultural history—Native American, Anglo, and Hispanic. The hippies immigrated to northern New Mexico, moreover, because their predecessors had demonstrated that Taos offered a haven for non-mainstream thought, spiritual renewal, and freedom, and a real alternative to a spiritually bankrupt, greedy, capitalist society. The hippies would enlarge upon that philosophy and turn some of these ideas into action by actually emulating the culture of the Indian Pueblo people, modeling that alternative for society at large. A later chapter is dedicated to the hippies' experiment.

Mabel Dodge entered into a mystical state, according to the definition laid out by William James, when she first encountered the majestic Taos landscape. Much like John Muir's first views of the Sierra Wilderness, her experience exhibited each of four elements James observed in most mystical states: ineffability, noetic, transient, and

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<sup>111</sup> Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform*, 195.

passivity.<sup>112</sup> “My courage diminished a little and I felt somehow unequal to the power that rose all about me,” she wrote of the divine force that overwhelmed her. “Surely no one had ever been able to dominate and overcome this country where life flowed unhampered in wave upon wave of happiness and delight in being. Everything had its being—the water, the trees, the earth and sky. ‘It lives and moves and has its Being!’” she exclaimed, unable to fully express her experience. “I thought again. ‘Much more than other places.’ How faint the life of Italian earth seemed to me as I recalled it; how faint and dim and dying out. And New York! Why, when I remembered that clamor and movement out here beside this river, listening to the inner sound of these mountains and this flow,” she marveled at hearing the inner sound of the mountain communicating with her, “the rumble of New York came back to me like the impotent and despairing protest of a race that has gone wrong and is caught in a trap. How unhappy, how horribly unhappy, the memory of the sound of New York was in my ears! I felt scared. Could I hook on here and mingle with it, or was it too late? I recognized that it was mine for the recognition, but had I stayed away too long?”<sup>113</sup> She already felt different, transformed, from the woman she had been in the East. When she returned to the car, and began talking with her traveling companions, the feelings quickly passed, although the profound impact of her experience lingered on.

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<sup>112</sup> Taos Society of Artist’s founder, Ernest L. Blumenschein, had a similar mystical experience during his first encounter with the Taos landscape.

<sup>113</sup> Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 33.

As a young man, Everett Ruess, reached mystical states when he wandered the four corners region during the early 1930s. Like the Taos Society of Artists he sought to transmit the beauty of the Southwest through his paintings. Like Mabel Dodge Luhan, he documented his spiritual transformation, but even as young man, he had a much stronger command of the written word than she. He was a loner though, a wilderness wanderer, and as the cool winter air began settling in over the Navajo Nation in November, 1934, he disappeared.



CHAPTER III  
KEROUAC OF THE CANYONLANDS:  
ON THE ROAD WITH EVERETT RUESS

On a warm summer morning in 1930, a frail, anemic sixteen-year-old boy with sandy blonde hair stepped out of the doorway of a Los Angeles ranch-style home. His parents helped him strap on an enormous backpack and bedroll, which weighed in at well over fifty pounds. Eager to embark on his first extended solo trip, Everett Ruess walked out to the road and ambled north, his thumb in the air, trying to catch a ride up the coast. A van loaded with nine occupants soon stopped and gave him a ride. He first headed to Carmel and camped on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, lulled to sleep by the crashing waves.<sup>1</sup> His adventure had begun.

Just as John Muir made a vow to God at the beginning of his wanderings, Everett Ruess similarly penned a poem titled *Pledge to the Wind*:

In the steep silence of thin blue air,  
High on a lonely cliff-ledge,  
Where the air has a clear, clean rarity,  
I give to the wind . . . my pledge:

“By the strength of my arm, by the sight of my eyes,  
By the skill of my fingers, I swear,  
As long as life dwells in me, never will I  
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind.

“I will feel the wind’s buoyancy until I die;

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<sup>1</sup> W.L. Rusho, “Introduction,” in W.L. Rusho, ed., *Wilderness Journals of Everett Ruess* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1998), 11.

I will work with the wind's exhilaration;  
I will search for its purity; and never will I  
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind."

Here in the utter stillness,  
High on a lonely cliff-ledge,  
Where the air is trembling with lightning,  
I have given the wind my pledge.<sup>2</sup>

Quickly realizing that he had packed too many provisions, Ruess began removing items he could do without. He vowed that on his next journey he would find a burro to help him carry his supplies.<sup>3</sup> The youth spent some time wandering the mountains of Big Sur.<sup>4</sup> After leaving the coast, he journeyed inland to Yosemite National Park, where he explored lakes, trails, mountain peaks, and valleys, still toting his fifty pound pack.<sup>5</sup> His goal was to travel the more desolate regions of the Southwest, where the landscape and its inherent adventure possibilities would provide, he hoped, inspiration for a bright future in the artistic world. He planned to wander for an undetermined period of time. Although he returned home for brief periods, usually to ride out the roughest part of the winters, he spent most of the next four years in the sparsely inhabited Four Corners region, painting and writing exquisite poetry and letters. In November 1934, Everett

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<sup>2</sup> Everett Ruess, "Pledge to the Wind," in Gary James Bergera, ed. *On Desert Trails with Everett Ruess* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 2000), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Rusho, "Introduction," in Rusho, ed., *Wilderness Journals of Everett Ruess*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ruess to father, mother, and Waldo [brother], 24 July 1930, in W.L. Rusho, ed., *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1983), 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Ruess to father, mother, and Waldo, 22 August 1930, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 21-24.

Ruess vanished without a trace. He was last seen near Davis Canyon in southeastern Utah.

Everett Ruess was on a quest—but for what? Did he find what he was looking for? It remains unknown; his brief life and disappearance are shrouded in mystery.

Ruess vanished in 1934 at the age of twenty, but his words and legend live on.

Remembered as a poet, artist, writer, intellectual, and naturalist, he has inspired many romantically-inclined young men who also understood the immense beauty and freedom to be found in the wilderness. Ruess has acquired mythical status over the years, but his life raises many important questions and issues. His words and ideas are inspiring a large audience, and he may eventually find his place in history with other provocative thinkers who shared similar beliefs, such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Jack Kerouac.

A number of writers have compared Ruess to Kerouac, one arguing that Ruess was, “a Western myth now, a Kerouac of the canyonlands, embodiment of the romantic ideal of finding beauty and freedom in nature.”<sup>6</sup> One of the most famous of the Beats, Jack Kerouac helped shape the Beat movement during the 1950s and, for that matter, the later hippie movement. Kerouac, like Ruess, was a rambler and a writer, documenting his often booze-and-benzedrine-fueled wanderings, most famously in *On the Road*. As Benedict Giomo, professor of American studies, explains, “Kerouac was, above all, a ragged priest of the word, a prose artist on a spiritual quest for the ultimate meaning of

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Banks, “Wandering Soul,” *Tucson Weekly*, 8-14 May 1997.

existence and suffering and the celebration of joy in the meantime—when you can get it, and by all means get IT, he would no doubt say, for his ‘mind whirl[ed] with life.’” It is difficult to describe what “IT” was to Kerouac, but he spent most of his life searching for the elusive concept, as Ruess had.<sup>7</sup> Giamo explains that Kerouac “was a natural—a very intuitive writer, and arguably the most passionate, revealing, and underrated innovator of American literature in the twentieth century. Kerouac’s original prose styles reflected the forms of his search for personal meaning and spiritual intensity.” Many of his books were written through stream of consciousness. His brilliant prose exuded unbridled enthusiasm, an overwhelming passion for life, and an energetic improvisational be-bop jazz style flowing with rhythm. He believed strongly in the sanctity of daily life and in the idea that each moment was precious.<sup>8</sup> Jack Kerouac was, in short, “carpe diem” personified; the same could be said of Everett Ruess.

This chapter argues that Ruess experienced ever-increasing degrees of freedom—physical, social, and spiritual—as he wandered the Southwest on his quest for a spiritual awakening. He represents a current in American culture, and although many impassioned seekers have felt as he did and sought similar experiences, Ruess articulated these ideas better than most people and left behind a prolific assortment of written material documenting his pursuit of enlightenment. Ruess felt the pull of his family and urban life

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<sup>7</sup> This “difficult to describe, IT,” points to William James’ first characteristic of *mystical states*, ineffability. Both Ruess and Kerouac apparently experienced this and each sought more; William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1902, reprint (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 332-34.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Giamo, *Kerouac, The Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), xiv-xv.

in California and the beauty and isolation of the open spaces of the Southwest. He spent the years from 1930 to 1934 traveling back and forth between the regions he imagined as wilderness and civilization, feeling the conflicting attraction of each. Then in 1934, his connection with the West deepened. As his sense of freedom and philosophical spiritual feelings grew, he found the solitude of the West to be an antidote for civilization.

The Everett Ruess story first spread by word of mouth in the form of campfire tales; the legend expanded as his ideas reached a wider audience through the famous wilderness author Edward Abbey, who first eulogized Ruess in his book *Desert Solitaire* (1968).<sup>9</sup> When Abbey describes his own seduction by the desert, he describes Ruess as an illustration. Abbey tries to explain what people like Ruess were seeking, the same “IT” that Kerouac and Abbey, too, chased after. “Even after years of intimate contact and search this quality of strangeness in the desert remains undiminished. Transparent and intangible as sunlight, yet always and everywhere present, it lures a man on and on, from the red-walled canyons to the smoke-blue ranges beyond, in a futile but fascinating quest for the great, unimaginable treasure which the desert seems to promise,” Abbey explained. “Once caught by this golden lure you become a prospector for life, condemned, doomed, exalted. One begins to understand why Everett Ruess kept going

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<sup>9</sup> “When I wrote about Everett I was going by memory and hearsay only,” Abbey wrote to Everett Ruess’ brother Waldo two years later, “for me, as for others who love the canyons and have heard about Everett, he was and remains a person of great interest and attraction, the kind of active romantic which many of us would have wanted to be in our youth . . . but lacked the courage or will to actually practice.” Abbey concluded, “there is genuine admiration.”; Edward Abbey to Waldo Ruess, 12 July 1970, Box 29, Folder 3, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

deeper and deeper into the canyon country, until one day he lost the thread of the labyrinth; why the oldtime prospectors, when they did find the common sort of gold, gambled, drank and whored it away as quickly as possible and returned to the burnt hills and the search.” Abbey then pondered, “The search for what?” And concluded, “They could not have said; neither can I; and would have muttered something about silver, gold, copper—anything as a pretext. And how could they hope to find this treasure which has no name and has never been seen? Hard to say—and yet, when they found it, they could not fail to recognize it. Ask Everett Ruess.”<sup>10</sup> Eventually three films, at least two songs, and several books were written about Ruess’s life and disappearance; and, as a result, his words and ideas are now finding an even larger audience. An Internet search on “Everett Ruess” returned 22,700 “hits” in 2007, by 2012 that number had reached 173,000. One newly added website is the “Everett Ruess: Official Licensed Site,” which also sells posters, prints, postcards, t-shirts, water bottles, and even coffee mugs.<sup>11</sup> People disenchanted with aspects of modern society are attracted to his philosophy in increasing numbers as they search for meaning in their own lives.

Ruess led an exceptionally adventurous life for such a young man in 1930s America. Since the first immigrants landed in North America, and perhaps even longer than that, the American West and its shifting frontier have inspired wanderlust. By the

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness: A Celebration of the Beauty of Living in a Harsh and Hostile Land*, 1968, reprint (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 272-73.

<sup>11</sup> *Everett Ruess Officially Licensed Website* (accessed 13 March 2012); available from <http://www.everettruess.net/>.

1910s, many men and women had become extremely disenchanted with American life, its urban industrialism, its capitalist ethos, and its declining moral values and longed to leave it or perhaps try something radically different.<sup>12</sup> Those ideas spread from Taos, as the previous chapter revealed, and other regions as well. Ruess was emblematic of his generation; he absorbed commonly held Romantic beliefs and acted upon them, diving into a newfound freedom that most only dreamed of. In a time of increasing industrialization, Ruess looked back to less complicated times and simpler pleasures.

It is not surprising that a young man like Ruess would have become disenchanted with his prospects for the future in California during the early 1930s. A song written in 1931 summed up the era for many young men, the title echoed their asking, “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” Wall Street crashed during October 24-29, 1929, losing roughly a third of its value in less than one week. The Great Depression that ensued remained the deepest economic crisis the world has known in recorded history. These events surely pushed Ruess toward his journey; he left home for the first time during the Summer of 1930. The young man certainly must have felt he had little to come home to as unemployment rates skyrocketed. Whereas unemployment hovered at around three percent at the beginning of 1930, it had nearly tripled to almost nine percent by the end of the same year. Three years later, the unemployment rate had nearly tripled again, to almost twenty five percent and the average family’s income had decreased by around forty percent during this time. Over one million Americans seeking work migrated to

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 180.

California during the 1930s, many of them as farm workers. The immigrants made up roughly a quarter of the state's residents. Racism against Mexican farm workers erupted quickly, and many of them were deported. It was the era of the automobile, and the gasoline engines brought the first pollution as well. The 1920s had seen the rise of the consumer, and radios had become a focal point in many homes. Advertising had also increased dramatically as companies competed vigorously for Americans' business. Franklin Roosevelt tried to calm the nation's fears through his fireside chats, which began on March 12, 1933, shortly after his inauguration as president. It was a frightful time; many Americans awoke to a new reality, one where the American Dream had evaporated. Those living through those dark economic times had no idea when, or if, the economy would improve. It makes sense, then, that some people sought escape, and adventurers could help provide that outlet. Amelia Earhart made her famous solo transatlantic flight in 1932, as America desperately searched for heroes. She was the first woman to accomplish this feat and the second person overall, following Charles Lindbergh, who made his celebrated flight in 1927. Like these figure, Ruess also sought escape through adventure. As Americans flooded west across California's borders in search of work, Ruess headed east to the Southwest on a far different quest.

Before he began his journey, Ruess already held a highly romantic notion of the Southwest and the Indian people of the region. Many Americans like Ruess had found inspiration in the regional literature emerging at the turn of the twentieth century. Charles Fletcher Lummis, editor of *Out West* magazine and author of *Some Strange Corners of our Country: the Wonderland of the Southwest*, had described the Southwest



as a region where a tourist would find many cultures and ethnicities intermingling. According to Lummis, it was the most romantic region in the nation, with the grandest Indian ruins, “the deepest and noblest chasms in the world . . . the strangest and grandest scenery, the most remarkable geographic contrasts.”<sup>13</sup> Southwest tourist brochures from this time also romanticized the Southwest as a region offering “unforgettable days in a new-old land far from the beaten path--days of leisurely comfort spent in visiting the ancient Indian Pueblos and prehistoric cliff-dwellings.”<sup>14</sup> Ruess, no doubt, was also exposed to the ideas, artwork, and writing that had enlivened Taos, where Mabel Dodge Luhan and D.H. Lawrence had described Pueblo Indians as America’s original inhabitants and depicted their own migrations to the Southwest as a return to authenticity. These romantic notions of the region sparked Ruess’ desire to fully explore the area himself.

Ruess left behind a sheaf of journals, letters, poetry, and art conveying his infatuation with the West. He was blessed in his ability to express in the written word the love he felt for his surroundings; one author described his prose as “lyrical lightning.”<sup>15</sup> His writings, which were often philosophical and spiritual, reflect the influences not only of authors he had read but also of his family and those people he met during his wanderings. His mother, an artist trained at Columbia University, had transmitted her

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Martin Padget, *Indian Country: Travels in the American Southwest 1840-1935* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Banks, “Wandering Soul,” *Tucson Weekly*, 8-14 May 1997.

love of art to the receptive young Ruess. She also taught art, enjoyed reading philosophy, and participated in several art, writing, poetry, and music clubs in Los Angeles. Ruess's father, a Unitarian minister, also dabbled in poetry.<sup>16</sup> The western landscape itself had a profound impact on the development of Everett Ruess's spiritual ideas. Ruess had pantheistic ideas about nature, which increased as he spent more time in the western wilderness. His writing shows marked similarities to the earlier writings of Thoreau and Muir. A college philosophy notebook of his revealed that the youth definitely had an understanding of a variety of philosophical and religious traditions, including Transcendentalism, Buddhism, Pantheism, Lao-Tse and Taoism, the divine unity of nature, Gnosticism, the pursuit of pleasure, Confucianism, Asceticism, Hedonism, and Mysticism.<sup>17</sup> His letters and poems reflect aspects of each of these traditions. He befriended famous artists, such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Maynard Dixon, and Dorothea Lange, several of whom remembered him as quite a loner, and he came to admire not only artists, but also cowboys, Native Americans, and a variety of other fellow adventurers he met throughout the Southwest. Their influence on Ruess, especially their views on American Indians, is exemplified in Ansel Adams' book on Taos Pueblo (1930). Adams's images, coupled with Mary Austin's glowing account of the Tewa people certainly had an effect on Ruess. Further, Maynard Dixon wrote dramatic descriptions of his experiences in New Mexico and Arizona. As new parents,

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<sup>16</sup> Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Everett Ruess, Philosophy Notebook, 1932-33, Box 2, Folder 4, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

Dixon and Lange chose to name their baby John Eaglesfeather Dixon, a clear nod to American Indian culture. Since Ruess admired these artists, their praise for Native people may well have affected his stance.

Many authors have written about Everett Ruess, but most of them have focused on his disappearance, looking back at Ruess's life from the present vantage point, rather than examining Ruess's evolution as it occurred.<sup>18</sup> John P. O'Grady, in *Pilgrims to the Wild*, argues that the young man made a pilgrimage through erotic space and had a sensory-based love affair with the wild. No one has argued, as this chapter does, that Ruess felt increasingly free—physically, socially, and spiritually—as his connection with the West deepened, especially during 1934, as he roamed the relatively desolate Four Corners region. He increasingly equated the West with physical and spiritual freedom, and viewed it as the cure for the problems he associated with “civilization.”

Ruess left home in the summer of 1930 with the blessing of his parents, full of excitement and ready for adventure. His goal was vague, but he intended to immerse himself in the beauty of the natural world and to transmit that beauty through his writing and artwork. In May 1930, Ruess made it clear that one of his ambitions was “to

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Gary James Bergera, “The Murderous Pain of Living: Thoughts on the Death of Everett Ruess,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67 (1999): 57; W.L. Rusho, ed., *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1983); W.L. Rusho, ed., *Wilderness Journals of Everett Ruess* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1998); Mark A. Taylor, *Sandstone Sunsets: In Search of Everett Ruess* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1997); W. L. Rusho, Everett Ruess, and W. L. Rusho, *The Mystery of Everett Ruess* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2010); David Roberts, *Finding Everett Ruess: The Life and Unsolved Disappearance of a Legendary Wilderness Explorer* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011); Philip L. Fradkin, *Everett Ruess: His Short Life, Mysterious Death, and Astonishing Afterlife* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

accomplish something very definite in art.”<sup>19</sup> He anticipated that his travels would enable him to experience life more fully, expose him to incredible beauty and adventure, and hopefully, make him a better artist. He explained, “I must pack my short life full of interesting events and creative activity. Philosophy and aesthetic contemplation are not enough. I intend to do everything possible to broaden my experiences and allow myself to reach the fullest development.”<sup>20</sup> “At the beginning of his multiple treks into the desert,” New Mexico writer John Nichols explains, “Ruess had no real idea of exactly what he hoped to accomplish. Toward the end of his recorded wanderings a few years later, that lack of focus no longer mattered.” Nichols also notes that, at some point during his travels, Ruess may have been seeking nothing short of enlightenment.<sup>21</sup>

Ruess began by exploring the high Sierras of California and recorded his explorations in the letters he wrote to his parents, brother, and friends. In August 1930, after only two months, he was already starting to enjoy the natural world much more than the civilized world he had left behind. When he returned home, he lamented that he “was returning from the mountains and the solitude to the valley, the noisy, uninitiated tourists, and eventually to the city and its sordid buildings and business places.”<sup>22</sup> These words seem like echoes from John Muir resounding off the canyon walls from decades past.

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<sup>19</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 2 May 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> John Nichols, “Introduction,” in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, ix.

<sup>22</sup> Ruess to father, mother, and Waldo, 22 August 1930, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 23.

He lingered only briefly in Los Angeles. After graduating from high school, he returned to the relative solitude of what he viewed as wilderness, and he reinvented himself there. Although some might argue that Navajo country and the other parts of the Four Corners region that Ruess traversed were not wilderness, they certainly seemed like wild lands to him. Ruess fell deeply in love with the natural world of the Southwest and the overwhelming beauty and solitude he discovered there. This became his version of wilderness,

His first destination was Monument Valley, which lies in the heart of the Navajo Nation. Well-known writer and Indian activist Charles Lummis had written about the Navajo reservation in the 1920s, turning the Navajos into paragons of romanticized noble Indians. Romantic images of the region and its inhabitants most likely drew Ruess to the sparsely populated region. He departed from Los Angeles sometime in early February 1931, deciding not to wait until winter was over. By mid-month, he had passed through Flagstaff, traveled across the Painted Desert, and arrived in Kayenta, Arizona, gateway to Monument Valley. In his first letter home, he evoked the romance of the land, noting that only a decade ago this was at the edge of the frontier. Still, he observed with a razor-sharp wit, “I haven’t met a single person who I thought ought to be shot.”<sup>23</sup>

That summer, Ruess walked some three hundred miles to the Grand Canyon. Many artists and writers have had difficulty expressing the extraordinary beauty of the Grand Canyon in their works, and for the most part Ruess did not even try, observing

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<sup>23</sup> Ruess to Bill, 13 February 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 27.

only that “Nothing anywhere can rival the Grand Canyon.”<sup>24</sup> Despite his inability to capture its beauty in writing, he visited the canyon several more times over the next three years. That first summer, he explored the canyon and parts of Utah, including Zion, as well as some of the region’s cliff dwellings, before heading south to the saguaro cactus country, east of the small metropolis of Phoenix.<sup>25</sup> Then in December, Ruess hitchhiked back to his home in Los Angeles to ride out the rest of the winter.

Ruess felt torn between the pull of city-life and the solitude of the Southwest. In March 1932, he headed back to the wilds of southern Arizona, then up to the Navajo reservation that had so captivated him.<sup>26</sup> Ruess then spent time exploring parts of southern Colorado and Arizona before returning to Los Angeles in September. He enrolled for one semester at UCLA, probably at the request of his father, but lasted only that one semester, saying that college was not for him.<sup>27</sup>

During the spring and early summer of 1933, Ruess vacillated between civilization and “wilderness,” journeying to San Francisco and Carmel before escaping into the Sierra Nevada. In October, he returned to San Francisco where he spent time

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<sup>24</sup> Ruess in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Phoenix had a population of roughly 50,000 people according to the 1930 U.S. Census.

<sup>26</sup> Ruess to father, mother, and Waldo, 30 March 1932, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Ruess certainly did not leave school because of lack of ability. A professor critiqued one of his poems titled “The Failure and the Masterpiece,” writing, “This is an excellent piece of work . . . It is exceptionally good.”; Everett Ruess, *The Failure and the Masterpiece*, Box 2, Folder 12, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

with many famous artists, including Maynard Dixon, Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston. He met most of them by boldly introducing himself, sometimes by knocking on their front doors. San Francisco was a life-changing experience for him. “He was to be enthralled and enlightened,” the writer W.L. Rusho wrote, “but also shaken and disturbed. He entered the city as a sensitive youth; he left it four months later as a mature adult, hoping to make an artistic mark on the world.”<sup>28</sup> In San Francisco, he lived a bohemian lifestyle that he said integrated “an undercurrent of starvation and an overtone of magnificent music.”<sup>29</sup> The resident artists apparently thought Ruess showed a certain promise as an artist and spent some time helping and instructing him.<sup>30</sup>

During the four years he spent adventuring in the desert, Ruess continually sought to remake himself, as is evidenced by his frequent name changes. Shortly after beginning his wanderings, in 1931, he began to shed his old self and his old life. He changed his name to Lan Rameau and began to sign all of his letters with that nom de plume.<sup>31</sup> And he named his burro Everett, observing sardonically that the burro reminded him of how he himself used to be.<sup>32</sup> Later, Ruess again changed names; this time he

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<sup>28</sup> Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 13 December 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 107-8.

<sup>30</sup> Ruess to mother, 5 November 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 118.

<sup>31</sup> Ruess to Bill, 9 March 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 30. The significance of this particular choice of names is unknown, although Rameau is a French surname. Ruess says that a friend helped him choose the name as a *nomme de broushe* or brush name, presumably for his artwork.

<sup>32</sup> Ruess to family, 2 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 37.

took the nom de plume Evert Rulan and changed his burro's name to Pegasus.<sup>33</sup> That name did not last long, and he soon quietly went back to being Everett Ruess. The literary critic John O'Grady noted that changing one's name is a common practice in many cultures, suggesting the transition from one period of life into a much different one.<sup>34</sup> Ruess was definitely at such a transition point, but he remained alone in the endeavor, not having tribal elders or others to help guide his way. Ruess immersed himself in another culture as he was transitioning to a new identity, exploring many cliff dwellings and learning to cook "squaw bread," his phrase for fry bread, a Navajo staple.<sup>35</sup> The significance of his particular choices of names is unknown. He did not adopt a Navajo name, perhaps because he was being influenced by many other cultures as well.

As Ruess traveled the open spaces of the Southwest, he developed a new philosophy. In a letter home, Ruess described his life and plans: "while I am alive, I intend to live."<sup>36</sup> Surely, he drew inspiration directly from the words of Henry David Thoreau, who wrote in *Walden*, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it

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<sup>33</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 19 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 42. He changed his name to "Evert Rulan," stating that "Those who knew me formerly thought my name was freakish and an affectation of Frenchiness." He wrote that his new name was easy to spell, pronounce, and remember, and was distinctive.

<sup>34</sup> John P. O'Grady, *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ruess to family, 1 March 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ruess to Bill, 9 March 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 31.



had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”<sup>37</sup> To really “live” and to “front only the essential facts of life” meant to fully explore and understand the wild parts of the world as well as the wild parts of oneself. Alone in nature, both Thoreau and Ruess were able to strip away the layers of opinions which had been thrust upon them by their cultures and discover their own true identities. Later, reflecting on his wanderings in typical transcendental style, he observed that he had indeed lived life fully. “Alone on the open desert, I have made up songs of wild, poignant rejoicing and transcendental melancholy. The world has seemed more beautiful to me than ever before. I have loved the red rocks, the twisted trees, the red sand blowing in the wind, the slow, sunny clouds crossing the sky, the shafts of moonlight on my bed at night,” he wrote. “I have seemed to be at one with the world. I have rejoiced to set out, to be going somewhere . . . I have been happy in my work, and I have exulted in my play. I have really lived.”<sup>38</sup>

In his wanderings, Ruess began to distance himself from American materialism. “Somehow, I am very glad not to be home, where civilized life thrusts the thought of money upon one from all sides,” Ruess wrote. “With an adequate stock of provisions I can forget the cursed stuff, or blessed stuff, for days and weeks at a time.”<sup>39</sup> These words point to his increasing dislike for anything having to do with the “civilized” world.

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<sup>37</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 81-82.

<sup>38</sup> Ruess to Bill, 18 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 1 May 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 42.

Historian Sherry Smith notes that Anglo writers such as Walter McClintock, George Bird Grinnell, Charles Fletcher Lummis, Mary Austin, Anna Ickes, and Mabel Dodge Luhan were antimodernists who went to the West to escape the weaknesses they found in American society: “conformity, rationality, scientific determinism, materialism, and corruption.”<sup>40</sup> Ruess, like these authors, tried to distance himself, physically, spiritually, and intellectually from the “civilized” world that valued material comforts over spiritual enlightenment.

Ruess greatly admired Native Americans, although he viewed them largely through the romantic context prevalent in the 1930s. Historian Margaret Jacobs notes that Anglo perceptions of American Indians underwent a dramatic shift in the years preceding 1920. While many Anglos had previously viewed Indian people as “backward, dirty, pagan, and in dire need of uplift,” anti-modernists who descended upon the West perceived them in a more positive, although highly romantic, perspective. They shaped the romantic mystique, for example, by actively promoting the arts and crafts created by Indians. By the 1930s the American public had begun to generalize and homogenize the idea of Native Americans as an exceptionally spiritual yet unchanging primitive people.<sup>41</sup> Ruess, having been shaped by this intellectual milieu, but also, surely, by his personal encounters with the Navajo people, wrote of his foray into the Navajo Reservation: “I

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<sup>40</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters*, 181.

entered country where people are hospitable, generous, and friendly.”<sup>42</sup> In a later letter he wrote, “The songs of the Navajos express for me something that no other songs do. And now that I know enough of it, it is a delight to speak in another language.”<sup>43</sup> According to Rusho, he marked his favorite passage in the family copy of *Death comes for the Archbishop* to express, presumably, his own thoughts:

It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. . . [The Indians] seemed to have none of the European’s desire to “master” nature, and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves. This was not from indolence . . . as from an inherited caution and respect. It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of earth air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse. . . . The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it.<sup>44</sup>

Ruess spoke fondly yet romantically of the ways in which the American Indians related to the world around them and realized that much could be learned by watching, listening to, and learning from them. John Muir, by contrast, wrote little about American Indians and his words could be viewed as racist according to today’s standards. Ruess held a more positive view toward Native Americans, in part, because of the cultural climate of the 1930s. Charles Fletcher Lummis, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Austin, and others had recently published works praising the authenticity and simplicity of life practiced by a variety of Indian tribes. Fred Harvey was offering his popular Indian tours, which he

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<sup>42</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 12 July 1932, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 179.

<sup>44</sup> Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 246.

called Indian Detours, throughout the Southwest. Ruess brought these positive images into his interactions with the Navajo and his words are therefore far more affirmative than those of Muir.

In this he differed from some of the Transcendentalists because he spent considerable time with Native people and even claimed to have taken part in their ceremonies. Of one Navajo woman, he wrote, "I can't tell you how her kindness warmed my bruised heart. I felt an overflowing of tenderness for those people." He added, "I have often stayed with the Navajos; I've known the best of them, and they were fine people. I have ridden with them on their horses, eaten with them, and even taken part in their ceremonies. Many are the delightful encounters, and many the exchange of gifts I've had with them."<sup>45</sup> On the Hopi reservation, he wrote that he had witnessed the Snake dance and that he actually took part in the Antelope dance. Although many spectators observed the Snake dance during this time-period, actually participating in the Antelope dance, if true, would have been a rare honor for a white man and a sign that the Hopi respected him. He also wrote that he spent a night in a Hopi kiva watching men practice the Buffalo and Antelope dances. Ruess himself indicated his reverence for these sacred rituals, writing: "naturally I did not try to take photographs of the Hopi dances, as that would be like taking a flashlight picture of communion in some church."<sup>46</sup> And in Navajo country, he observed, "I once spent three days far up in a desert canyon, assisting and watching a Navajo sing for a sick woman. I drove away countless hordes of

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<sup>45</sup> Ruess to Bill, 17 June 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> Ruess to mother, September 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 172.

evil spirits . . . The sand paintings, seldom seen by white men, were gorgeous.”<sup>47</sup> Even today non-Navajos are usually forbidden to look upon ceremonial sand paintings.

Ruess simultaneously embraced and rejected Native Americans, sometimes in a single letter or journal entry. “In Chin Lee [sic] I have met some very interesting and very generous people,” Ruess raved to his friend Bill from the heart of the Navajo Nation. “The Indians are not very loveable here,” Ruess dramatically shifted his tone. “Experienced Indian traders say that a Navajo is your friend only as long as you give to him,” he added for emphasis. “The Navajos do not help one another. If one Indian is trying to corral a herd of horses, and they start to escape past another Indian, the latter will stir neither hand nor foot, but will only laugh.” Ruess continued his rant, “When a Navajo begins to be helpless and decrepit, the others cease to have anything to do with him.”<sup>48</sup> Philip Deloria observes in *Playing Indian* that, “Indian people have been embraced and rejected, frequently humiliated, and occasionally empowered.”<sup>49</sup> Ruess vacillated in his views of American Indians. Perhaps, though, the differing perspective could be simply due to differences among individuals. It is difficult to generalize characteristics as applying to an entire group or tribe, although people attempt to regularly. Individual Navajos differ in personality from one another in the same way that whites differ from one another; Ruess’ varying perspectives could simply be drawn from randomly different experiences.

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<sup>47</sup> Ruess to Ned, 27 September 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 171.

<sup>48</sup> Ruess to Bill, 10 May 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 254.

Ruess's writing began to improve as he roamed and observed the canyonlands. He appears to have made a conscious intent to develop his empirical power of description as his passion for and awareness of his surroundings began to increase. "Had lunch under a cottonwood tree which was covered with young green leaves, just unfolding," Ruess wrote. "Watched little stars of light on the bottom of the stream, made by the sunlight passing through bubbles. Observed a water beetle catching minnows."<sup>50</sup> He became a naturalist, writing detailed descriptions of his environment. W.L. Rusho, the editor of Ruess's journal, concluded that "above all, Everett Ruess could see, in a way that far transcended the mere act of vision. His reactions to the wonders of Nature went beyond what we would assume to be normal experience, to the point where he could almost resonate to the light waves that struck him from all points in the landscape."<sup>51</sup> Ruess's effort to capture in his prose not only empirical details, but also mood and emotion, is unmistakable in this letter sent to some friends he spent time with outside Flagstaff, Arizona:

Those were great days at your ranch--idyllic days. There I seemed to feel the true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than man, lying in the long cool grass or on a flat-topped rock, looking up at the exquisitely curved, cleanly smooth aspen limbs, watching the slow clouds go by. I would close my eyes, and feel a coolness on my cheeks as the sun was covered, and then later, the warmth of the sun on my eyelids. And always there was the soft rustling of aspen leaves, and a queer sense of remoteness, of feeling more beauty than I can ever portray or tell of.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ruess to family, 2 April 1932, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ruess to Randolph "Pat" Jenks, 17 December 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 49.

Ruess was also an amateur painter, and was frustrated at times that his paintings were not of stellar quality. He apparently did not realize his gift to express himself in his writing, nor that his writing alone made him an artist. His words, unfortunately, went unpublished during his lifetime.

Ruess underwent a deep transformation in the relative solitude of the natural world of the West. “These days away from the city,” he wrote, “have been the happiest of my life, I believe.”<sup>53</sup> He found great joy and immense freedom in the isolated canyon country. “I myself feel much freer and happier here than I did in the city, but that is due not only to a change in environment, but to a change in my mental attitude.”<sup>54</sup> I doubt that, for Ruess, such profound changes in his mental attitude would have been possible without such a drastic change in his environment. Here, he displayed the “romantic attraction to primitivism,” which historian William Cronon described as the idea that “the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living.”<sup>55</sup> Ruess’s preference for nature and more primitive living come through in this letter to his friend Bill:

Maybe you have been gloating, as you have promised, over your hot baths and showers, but I don’t envy you. Hot baths, say the dermatologists, are bad for your complexion. At any rate, I feel more exhilaration from physical cleanliness when

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<sup>53</sup> Ruess to Bill, 18 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 19 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 76.

I swim or splash or bathe outdoors, under the wind and sun. My last bath was on a cliff top in a waterhole a yard across and three inches deep.<sup>56</sup>

Ruess seemed to find freedom exploring primitivism. He was clearly in a state of peace at this time as is evidenced from his closing remarks in a letter to his family: “Let your worries be as few as mine.”<sup>57</sup> “For myself,” he later wrote to his father, “I am doing my best to have variety and intensity of experience, and largely succeeding, I think. . . . but you may cease hoping that I will ever be practical in the accepted sense. I would sooner die.”<sup>58</sup> He preached sermons, through his writing, of living a wild, free life rather than living a life of practicality “in the accepted sense.” He chose to disregard the notions of conformity that were thrust upon him by his contemporaries. Ruess found absolute freedom in what he viewed as wilderness. He saw this freedom as more authentic than the “civilized” life of his friends and family in Los Angeles. Further, the literature he had absorbed persuaded him that American Indians also lived in the “wild and free” manner that he had chosen.

At the same time, Ruess became ever more spiritual and philosophical, drawing connections between physical and spiritual freedom. “There is a splendid freedom in solitude,” he wrote in a poem, “and after all, it is for solitude that I go to the mountains and deserts, not for companionship. In solitude I can bare my soul to the mountain unabashed. I can work or think, act or recline at my whim, and nothing stands between

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<sup>56</sup> Ruess to Bill, 2 May 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 42.

<sup>57</sup> Ruess to father, mother, and Waldo, 26 June 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Ruess to father, 2 January 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 131-32.



me and the Wild.”<sup>59</sup> It is telling that Ruess capitalized the “W” in “Wild.” Perhaps, he was equating “Wild” with God, or that the Wild was where Ruess experienced God, or perhaps Ruess was copying John Muir, who consistently capitalized the “N” in “nature.” Or perhaps he was mimicking Henry David Thoreau, who in the opening line of his essay “Walking” wrote, “I wish to speak a word for nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and Culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.”<sup>60</sup> Thoreau also once described a cloud-covered mountain as: “a hard featured god reposing, whose breath hangs about his forehead.”<sup>61</sup> And to a friend, Thoreau wrote, “You must have been enriched by your solitary walk over the mountains. I suppose that I feel the same awe when on their summits that many do on entering a church.”<sup>62</sup> Singer and songwriter Dave Alvin drew a similar conclusion about Ruess’s relationship with wild places. In his song, “Everett Ruess,” which he penned for his 2004 album, *Ashgrove*, Alvin sang as if he were Ruess, proclaiming:

Well I hate your crowded cities  
 With your sad and hopeless mobs  
 And I hate your grand cathedrals  
 Where you try to trap God  
 ‘Cause I know God is here in the canyons

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<sup>59</sup> Ruess, “Lone Trail,” in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 497.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

With the rattlesnakes and the piñon pines<sup>63</sup>

Ruess later gave further proof for this argument when some of his Mormon friends asked him what church he belonged to; he replied that he was a “pantheistic hedonist.”<sup>64</sup> And near Monument Valley, Ruess declared in his journal, “Beauty has always been my god; it has meant more than people to me.”<sup>65</sup> As Ruess spent more time in solitude, he increasingly equated God with nature.

During his wanderings, Ruess discovered the spirituality of solitude and meditation. “Somehow I don’t feel like writing now, or even talking. Both actions seem superfluous. If you were here you might understand, but too much is incommunicable. If I were there—but that is unthinkable. You cannot understand what aeons and spaces are between us,” he wrote. “I feel very different from the boy who left Hollywood two months ago. I have changed as well as matured.”<sup>66</sup> Ruess realizes that his experiences could not be adequately transmitted through words. “Ponder the proverb, ‘never less alone than when alone,’” he concluded his letter. “Thoughts are jangling within me. . . . Hope your next letter doesn’t say that you’re leading the same humdrum existence.”<sup>67</sup> Ruess found the natural world stimulating as his senses came alive to its beauty; he thought city-life was humdrum, creating a mechanized existence that dulled the senses.

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<sup>63</sup> Dave Alvin, “Everett Ruess,” *Ashgrove* (Chapel Hill: Yep Rock Records, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 180.

<sup>65</sup> Ruess to Bill, 17 June 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Ruess to Bill, 16 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Urban life created conformity and uniformity in his view. He preferred an authentic life where he could do as he wished each day. By 1933, Ruess had become much more philosophical and spiritual in his writings, as evident in the following poem:

A life  
Is a mirror  
Reflecting the road over which it passes.  
Sometimes  
When it rains  
The mirror itself is reflected in the road.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps he was saying that a life, or a person, reflects his surroundings. He felt that he was a happy and carefree person, reflecting the moods he associated with his environment. More likely, however, “road” was a metaphor for the “journey,” both spiritual and actual, that he was undertaking.

Ruess felt most truly alive in the desert. And yet, like the Transcendentalists, Ruess discovered that although he loved solitude he still felt the need for companionship. “I have had many sublime experiences which the presence of another person might well have prevented, but there are others which the presence of a perceptive and appreciative friend might have made doubly worthwhile,” he wrote. “People are interdependent, and I have felt the need of a real friend.”<sup>69</sup> In his longing for companionship, Ruess was not unlike Thoreau, Muir, or Luhan. All of them loved solitude, yet each had an immense yearning for deep meaningful bonds with true friends. Each structured his or her life to balance periods of solitude with periods of human interaction. Each had several strong

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<sup>68</sup> Ruess, “A Life,” in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 99.

<sup>69</sup> Ruess to Bill, 18 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 40.

friendships that continued through the years by correspondence, through which they bared their souls.

Historian Gary James Bergera argued that Ruess suffered from schizophrenia or manic depression and that his euphoric passages were written in a manic state.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly, he did reach these states of consciousness. After several weeks exploring the canyon country near Monument Valley, Kayenta, and Chilchinbetoh, Arizona, he proclaimed:

Once More I am roaring drunk with the lust of life and adventure and unbearable beauty. . . . Adventure seems to beset me on all quarters without my even searching for it . . . And yet there is always an undercurrent of restlessness and wild longing; “the wind is in my hair, there’s a fire in my heels,” and I shall always be a rover, I know. Always I’ll be able to scorn the worlds I’ve known like half-burnt candles when the sun is rising, and sally forth to others now and unknown. . . . Time and again, my life or all my possessions have swung on the far side of the balance, and always thus far I’ve come out on top unharmed, even toughened by the chances I’ve taken. . . . Finality does not appall me . . . I’ve had it up and down; no tedious, humdrum middle course has been mine, but a riotously plunging and soaring existence.<sup>71</sup>

But I believe that these altered states of consciousness were more spiritual in nature, as William James had proposed.<sup>72</sup> John Nichols noted in his introduction to Ruess’s letters, “It is not that the man took leave of his senses, but rather he was totally enflamed by a wonderful awareness of them.”<sup>73</sup> Ruess spent incredible lengths of time in utter silence,

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<sup>70</sup> Gary James Bergera, “The Murderous Pain of Living: Thoughts on the Death of Everett Ruess,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67 (1999): 57.

<sup>71</sup> Ruess to Bill, 5 May 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 145-46.

<sup>72</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 332-34.

<sup>73</sup> Nichols, “Introduction,” in *Vagabond for Beauty*, ix.

which was akin to meditation. He savored his time spent, “Far in the mountains where the stillness sings . . .”<sup>74</sup> His descriptions are also full of love, which is common among those who meditate regularly. Ram Dass wrote, in *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator’s Guidebook*, of the high states reached in meditation: “Such unbounded spacious awareness contains an intense love of God, equanimity, compassion, and wisdom. In it there is openness and harmony with the whole universe. Beings whose awareness is free enter into the ocean of love that has no beginning or end—love that is clear like a diamond, flowing like the ocean.”<sup>75</sup> Writer Mark Taylor points out, “When it comes to transcendence, silence is more powerful than the rivers or the oceans or the mountains or the deep winding canyons.”<sup>76</sup> Ruess spent much time in silence *in* the deep winding canyons. Thoreau, too, understood the euphoria of silent meditative periods, writing, “This stillness is more impressive than any sound.”<sup>77</sup> Ruess’s writings became increasingly spiritual and philosophical after longer periods in the Western wilderness. He did not suffer from a mental illness at all, rather he underwent a deep spiritual transformation as a result of his time in the wilds of the West.

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<sup>74</sup> Everett Ruess, *Sounds I Love to Hear*, Box 2, Folder 12, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

<sup>75</sup> Ram Dass, *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator’s Guidebook* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 215.

<sup>76</sup> Mark A. Taylor, *Sandstone Sunsets: In Search of Everett Ruess* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1997), 101.

<sup>77</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Vol. 3, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 340-41.

Ruess expressed an growing interest in both philosophy and spirituality as he experienced greater levels of freedom in the solitude of the West. The only letter he was known to have kept with him throughout his journey was written by his father in December 1933, in which his father answered, rather extensively, several ponderous questions that had been posed by his son. The questions from the young Ruess show that he was an extremely intelligent, intuitive, sensitive young man, increasingly interested in discovering spiritual truths, while also showing the great respect the youth had for his father. He asked questions such as, “Is passage from the sensual to the intellectual to the spiritual a correct progression for growth, and if so, should that growth be hastened?” “Do all things follow the attainment of Truth?” “Can one be happy while others are miserable?”<sup>78</sup> Ruess’s father had been trained at Harvard Divinity School and had once served as a Unitarian minister, and so his answers were well thought out, deeply spiritual, and quite wordy. An entire article could be written about this particular exchange. Suffice it to say that the young Ruess’s spiritual beliefs were surely deepened as a result of this written dialogue between father and son. His father wrote, for example, that death does end much, certainly not “one’s influence or the influence of one’s work.” He added that “Beauty,” “Goodness,” and “Truth” are ultimate fulfillments. “Eternity is just made of todays,” his father wrote, advising, “Glorify the hour.”<sup>79</sup> The young Ruess obviously thought this exchange was important; otherwise he would have discarded this letter with

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<sup>78</sup> Ruess to father, 4 December 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 120.

<sup>79</sup> Christopher Ruess to Everett Ruess, 10 December 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 123.

the rest. He soon replied to his father, “I have continued to seek beauty and friendship, and I think that I have really brought some beauty and delight into the lives of others, and that at least is something.”<sup>80</sup>

Ruess spent early 1934 planning his next foray into northern Arizona. Once again, he headed to the Navajo Reservation, specifically Monument Valley. As he wandered, a new philosophy emerged as his bond with the West grew. He developed further interest in spirituality and became, in a sense, a Transcendentalist.

Ruess slowly realized, as his connection with the desert landscapes deepened, that he would have a difficult time fully reentering his former world of cities and civilization. He wrote in his wilderness journal, “God, how the wild calls to me. There can be no other life for me but that of the lone wilderness wanderer. . . . The wild has an irresistible fascination for me. After all, the lone trail is the best.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, he wrote to a friend of his college experience, “How could a lofty, unconquerable soul like mine remain imprisoned in that academic backwater, wherein all but the most docile wallow in a hopeless slough?”<sup>82</sup> In November 1934, Ruess made his way to Escalante Utah, but did not stay long. He mentioned a girl, which gives a clue to his state of mind at this time. “If I had stayed any longer,” he observed, “I would have fallen in love with a Mormon girl, but it’s a good thing I didn’t. I’ve become a little too different from most of the rest

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<sup>80</sup> Ruess to father, 13 December 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 124.

<sup>81</sup> Ruess, 12 July 1932, in Rusho, ed., *Wilderness Journals of Everett Ruess*, 62.

<sup>82</sup> Ruess to Bob [surname unknown], 31 March 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 96.

of the world.”<sup>83</sup> He seems here to realize that he might forever be a vagabond, due to the profound changes occurring within him.

On November 11, 1934, Everett Ruess penned and mailed a letter to his brother Waldo in which he declared that he found freedom in the wild, to which he felt drawn. “As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities.” Then he added, “Do you blame me then for staying here, where I feel that I belong and am one with the world around me?” He contrasted his sense of home in the wilderness to his alienation from urban life. “Even from your scant description, I know that I could not bear the routine and humdrum of the life that you are forced to lead. I don’t think I could ever settle down. I have known too much of the depths of life already, and I would prefer anything to an anticlimax. That is one reason why I do not wish to return to the cities.” In concluding his letter, he wrote, “There would have to be a stronger incentive than any I know now to make me want to return to the old ways.”<sup>84</sup> He clearly cherished the natural world he was surrounded by; it was there that he now felt at home.

That letter to his brother Waldo was the last he would write. Earlier, in 1931, Ruess had ended a letter that reads, in hindsight somewhat prophetic: “My burro and I,

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<sup>83</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 178.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.



and a little dog, if I can find one, are going on and on, until, sooner or later, we reach the end of the horizon.”<sup>85</sup> On another occasion he had written, “before physical deterioration obtrudes, I shall go on some last wilderness trip, to a place I have known and loved. I shall not return.”<sup>86</sup> Despite these remarks, he did return over and over again to his family in California. Then on November 11, 1934, from Escalante Rim, Utah, Ruess informed his brother, “It may be a month or two before I have a post office, for I am exploring southward to the Colorado, where no one lives.” He signed this last letter to his brother, “Affectionately, Everett.”<sup>87</sup> Then he vanished.

After almost three months had passed and his uncollected mail had been returned by the postal service, his parents became alarmed. While looking for their son, they discovered that Everett had left Escalante as planned and hiked toward the side canyons of Escalante River. He met two sheepherders on November 19 and camped with them for two days. When he left the two men, he said that he was heading south to sketch and paint at Hole-in-the-Rock. There is no evidence that he was ever seen again.<sup>88</sup>

Theories abound as to the fate of Everett Ruess, but they still remain simply theories. It should be mentioned that many pieces of the puzzle of his disappearance are

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<sup>85</sup> Ruess to Bill, 18 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 40.

<sup>86</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 2 May 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 44.

<sup>87</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 180.

<sup>88</sup> Rusho, “Everett Ruess is Missing,” in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 183-84.

missing and may never be recovered. Many of his letters remain missing, and the surviving letters and wilderness journals have many erasures, possibly made by his mother to protect the family.<sup>89</sup> No replies to his letters have been found, except for the one from his father, and it is likely that he simply threw them away to lighten his load. Ruess often covered over twenty miles a day, and it was imperative not to be weighted down with unneeded baggage. No wilderness journals from the years 1930, 1931, or 1934 have been found, though it seems likely that he would have kept them, because journaling had been a long tradition in his family, one he himself had begun at age eleven.

Many people, including Ruess's parents, believe that he was murdered by traveling Native Americans or others who wished to steal his belongings. A Navajo outlaw charged for another crime allegedly confessed that he killed Ruess to use his scalp in a ceremony. Strong evidence also suggests that he may have been killed by cattle rustlers from Escalante, Utah; reportedly one man confessed that he had committed the murder. Two different men claimed to have killed Ruess, the Navajo and the rustler, but no charges were ever filed, and his body was never found.

Recently, however, the mystery deepened. National Geographic Adventure magazine published an article in the April/May 2009 edition titled, "Finding Everett

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<sup>89</sup> W.L. Rusho published the Ruess Journals in 1998. He claims to have transcribed them from photocopies of the originals, which he says contains erasures. Only typed manuscripts exist at the Utah archive, and it is unclear where Rusho saw the photocopies. The typed manuscripts contain additional editing from the photocopies.

Ruess.” I was shocked and enthralled as I read, “a skeleton in the desert, a Navajo tale of murder, and a battery of genetic and forensic analyses may finally put the legend to rest.” Aneth Nez had recently told his granddaughter, Daisy Johnson, that he had witnessed three Ute Indians murder a young Anglo who had two burros with him decades earlier. Nez then buried the body but kept it a secret. He finally told the story to his granddaughter in 2008. She relayed the tale to her brother, Denny Bellson, who searched for, and soon found, human remains at the location suggested by the elder Nez. Bellson alerted the FBI.<sup>90</sup> DNA results conducted by the University of Colorado at Boulder identified the body as that of Everett Ruess.<sup>91</sup> The bone structure and DNA analysis, however, were called into question. A new round of DNA tests proved that the remains actually belonged to a young Navajo man and the body was returned to the Navajo Nation for reburial.<sup>92</sup> The mystery endures.

Historian Gary James Bergera argues that Ruess committed suicide.<sup>93</sup> However, in one of his letters, Ruess had written, “And what magnificent country I have seen--wild,

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<sup>90</sup> David Roberts, Finding Everett Ruess, National Geographic Adventure, April/May 2009, accessed 13, March 2012, <http://adventure.nationalgeographic.com/2009/04/everett-ruess/david-roberts-text>

<sup>91</sup> Press Release. After 75 years, National Geographic ADVENTURE solves mystery of lost explorer. DNA results identify the body of 20-year-old Everett Ruess, National Geographic Adventure, April 30, 2009, accessed 14, March 2012, <http://adventure.nationalgeographic.com/2009/04/everett-ruess/dna-test-text>

<sup>92</sup> New Test Results Deepen Mystery Surrounding Explorer Everett Ruess, University of Colorado Boulder, October 21, 2009, accessed 14, March 2012, <http://www.colorado.edu/news/releases/2009/10/21/new-test-results-deepen-mystery-surrounding-explorer-everett-ruess>

<sup>93</sup> Bergera, “The Murderous Pain of Living,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67 (1999): 48-67.

tremendous wasteland stretches, lost mesas, blue mountains rearing upward from the vermillion sands of the desert, canyons five feet wide at the bottom and hundreds of feet deep, cloudbursts roaring down unnamed canyons, and hundreds of houses of the cliff dwellers, abandoned a thousand years ago.”<sup>94</sup> The following Ruess quote, from 1934, also displays this excitement and serves as further evidence that he did not commit suicide:

I find gay comradeships and lead the wild, free life wherever I am. . . . Oh it's a wild, gay time! Life can be rich to overflowing. I've been so happy that I can't think of containing myself. . . . I've carved a way for myself, turned hostile strangers into staunch friends, swaggered and sung through surplus of delight. . . . The things I've loved and given up have returned to me doubled. There's no one in the world I envy. . . . To be is to be happy; to be carefree, to be overwhelmed by the glory of it all. . . . Alone I shoulder the sky and hurl my defiance and shout the song of the conqueror to the four winds, earth, sea, sun, moon, and stars. I live!<sup>95</sup>

On another occasion he wrote, “Life is a song, and a happy one,”<sup>96</sup> A man who found such joy in his surroundings and who obviously enjoyed life enormously surely did not commit suicide.

Still others argue that Ruess orchestrated his own disappearance, and some of the more fanatical Ruess admirers believe that he is still alive today. He has reportedly been seen in Utah, California, and Florida, and there is a compelling account by a couple who claimed they spent time with him near Monterey, Mexico, in 1937, two and a half years

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<sup>94</sup> Ruess to Ned, 27 September 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 171.

<sup>95</sup> Ruess to Bill, 5 May 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 145-46.

<sup>96</sup> Everett Ruess, *Life is a Song*, Box 2, Folder 12, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

after his disappearance. Some say, though, that he had a Navajo sweetheart, whom he married, and quietly lived out the rest of his life on the reservation. When a Navajo medicine woman was consulted about the missing youth, she reported, “He has gone away and does not wish to come back. . . . He has given himself to our gods. He has taken us in his arms and wished to come among us.” She did add, paradoxically, that he did not reenter Navajo country.<sup>97</sup>

Ruess left one interesting clue behind. He carved the word “NEMO” and the year “1934” on a cliff dwelling inside a cave near the probable location of his disappearance. “Nemo” is Latin for “No One” or “Nobody.” In the last letter Ruess wrote, he said, “I am exploring southward to the Colorado, where no one lives.”<sup>98</sup> Ruess’s father noted that his son had read the Greek poem *Odyssey* while in the desert, mentioning that it was translated by Lawrence of the Arabian Desert. He said that “Nemo” was Latin for “nobody.” In the poem, Odysseus was trapped in a cave by a man-eating giant and saved his own life by calling himself Nemo. A few months later, however, his father decided on a different meaning, that “NEMO was an echo of Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, in which Captain Nemo, like Everett, was trying to escape civilization.”<sup>99</sup> The young Ruess had read this book many times, according to his father. “Nemo” was, in fact, Everett Ruess’s final name change. Some then argue that

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<sup>97</sup> John U. Terrell, “Indians Furnish Clue to Lost Artist’s Trail: Medicine Man’s Wife Draws Directions on Sand for Searchers to Follow,” in Gary James Bergera, ed., *On Desert Trails With Everett Ruess*, 85.

<sup>98</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 180.

<sup>99</sup> Christopher Ruess, June 1935 telegraph, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 191.

Ruess become Nemo—No One. And he thus succeeded, where John Muir failed, at leaving civilization entirely. The theory that Ruess orchestrated his own disappearance, although fascinating and romantically attractive, is highly unlikely, given his long history of correspondence and warm feelings towards his family. Surely he would not have allowed them to think he just died in the desert.

Others believe he perished in an accident such as falling off a cliff, freezing to death in a snowstorm, drowning in a flood, or a snakebite, and there is compelling evidence to support this argument considering his penchant for risk taking. For example, Ruess wrote, “One way or another, I have been flirting pretty heavily with Death, the old clown.”<sup>100</sup> Ruess had spent some time helping a group of archaeologists from the University of California, who were excavating Anasazi ruins along the Utah-Arizona border in the summer of 1934. One of the archeologists later reported that he witnessed Ruess nearly get himself killed trying to get a good vantage point on a slick cliff to do a watercolor sketch.<sup>101</sup> In his last letter, Ruess mentioned the risks he commonly took: “I have had a few narrow escapes from rattlers and crumbling cliffs.”<sup>102</sup> On another occasion, he wrote to a friend, “In my wanderings this year I have taken more chances and had more wild adventures than ever before.”<sup>103</sup> In May 1934, he hinted at his growing recklessness when he bragged that “many times in the search for water holes and

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<sup>100</sup> Ruess to Edward Gardner, May 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 147.

<sup>101</sup> Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 165.

<sup>102</sup> Ruess to Waldo, 11 November 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 178.

<sup>103</sup> Ruess to Ned [Frisius], 27 September 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 171.

cliff dwellings, I trusted my life to crumbling sandstone and angles little short of perpendicular, startling myself when I came out whole and on top.”<sup>104</sup> John Muir similarly took physical risks in the Sierras. Perhaps both of their actions came from professed feelings of immortality that grew as they spent more time in the wild. Several authors have mused that Ruess’s demise came in just such a way, with less luck on his side. This theory of Ruess’s death, however, does not account for his missing pack and supplies, or for the absence of a body. One should be aware, however, that Navajos lived in the Grand Canyon, and no Navajo would allow the body to just lie there in the open; their belief in *chindi* would have militated against that.<sup>105</sup> Someone would have buried it, and they probably would have buried his belongings with it. There is much evidence for and against each of these arguments, but all prove inconclusive.

Numerous authors have romanticized Ruess’s disappearance. Author John Nichols suggested that “in the end he must have literally exploded, his slight body incapable of containing all the melodramatic sensations he tirelessly ladled into it. But I picture him simply expiring on the edge of a sandstone cliff, in the shadow of some high circling buzzard, convinced that he could never again return to civilization.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, wilderness writer Edward Abbey wrote with envy, “To die in the open, under the sky, far from the insolent interference of leech and priest, before this desert vastness opening like

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<sup>104</sup> Ruess to Emily [Ormond], 2 May 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 142.

<sup>105</sup> *Chindi* is the Navajo term used to describe the ghost-like spirit, usually evil, which departs from a body as it dies. Many Navajo people believe that a person should die outside so that the *chindi* will not be trapped in a home, and bodies are always buried.

<sup>106</sup> Nichols, “Introduction,” in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, x.

a window onto eternity—that surely[would be] an overwhelming stroke of good luck.”<sup>107</sup>

Nichols and Abbey, like many who have written about Ruess, highly romanticized his death or disappearance. Perhaps Ruess and Abbey both borrowed this idea from John Muir, who once awoke from a dream in which he had died falling from a cliff, and exclaimed: “and where could [a] mountaineer find a more glorious death!”<sup>108</sup> These men shared a romantic notion of dying in the western wilderness.

We will most likely never know what happened to Everett Ruess. His disappearance and the surrounding mystery no doubt helped him reach the legendary status he has acquired. As the songwriter Dave Alvin sang, in Ruess’s imagined voice:

They say I was killed by a drifter  
Or I froze to death in the snow  
Maybe mauled by a wildcat  
Or I’m living down in Mexico  
.....  
But my end, it doesn’t really matter  
All that counts is how you live your life  
.....  
You give your dreams away as you get older  
Oh, but I never gave up mine  
And they’ll never find my body, boys  
Or understand my mind.<sup>109</sup>

The important thing is not how Ruess died, but how he lived.

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<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Bergera, “Murderous Pain of Living,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67 (1999): 53.

<sup>108</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911; reprint, Georgia: Norman S. Berg, 1972), 161.

<sup>109</sup> Alvin, “Everett Ruess,” *Ashgrove*, 2004.



His thoughts and ideas have touched many people, and his influence continues to expand through word of mouth, songs, books, movies, and the Internet. Through his poetry and his observations of the southwestern landscape, Ruess has become a legend among backcountry hikers. Interestingly, the elder Ruess once wrote to his son, "Perhaps even the echoes of your voice may go on forever."<sup>110</sup> Ruess himself hoped to influence others. "Adventure is for the adventurous," he wrote. "My face is set. I go to make my destiny. May many another youth be by me inspired to leave the snug safety of his rut, and follow fortune to other lands."<sup>111</sup>

Edward Abbey still thought highly of Ruess in 1983, many years after first writing about the young man, when he penned the poem entitled "A Sonnet for Everett Ruess."

You walked into the radiance of death  
through passageways of stillness, stone and light,  
gold coin of cottonwoods, the spangled shade,  
cascading song of canyon wren, the flight  
of scarlet dragonflies at pools, the stain  
of water on a curve of sand, the art  
of roots that crack the monolith of time.

You know the crazy lust to probe the heart  
of that which has no heart we could know,  
toward the source, deep in the core, the maze,  
the secret center where no bounds hold.

Hunter, brother, companion of our days:  
that blessing you hunted, hunted too;

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<sup>110</sup> Christopher Ruess to Everett Ruess, 10 December 1933, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 123.

<sup>111</sup> Ruess, "Adventure is for the Adventurous," in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 70.

that you were seeking is what found you.<sup>112</sup>

This eulogy to Ruess is important because Abbey, after acquiring much notoriety in his own right, acknowledges that he was still following Ruess's footprints. It also further helped spread Ruess's name to more backcountry hikers who shared his sentiments.<sup>113</sup>

Many members of the Beat Generation later made popular the themes Ruess had articulated. Jack Kerouac, in particular, is a more famous example of the same spirit that Ruess exuded, although no evidence proves that Kerouac was familiar with Ruess or his writings. Both Ruess and Kerouac expressed ambivalence about urbanity and modernity that is a deep strand of American culture stretching back to the Transcendentalists. Kerouac, like Ruess, gained spiritual inspiration from the natural world. He did not view the West solely through an automobile window; he once worked for the U.S. Forest Service. Kerouac's time working in solitude in Mt. Baker National Forest in Washington provided inspiration for three later works that also dealt with spirituality: *The Dharma Bums*, *Lonesome Traveler*, and *Book of Blues*. For sixty-three days, he had no human

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<sup>112</sup> Edward Abbey, *Earth Apples (Pommes de Terre): The Poetry of Edward Abbey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 101.

<sup>113</sup> After reading newspaper accounts of the young man's disappearance, historian Wallace Stegner wrote admiringly about Everett Ruess in his 1942 book *Mormon Country*. Almost four decades later he wrote to Waldo Ruess that Everett Ruess was, "a sensitive young man," who journeyed, "into country then known only to a few Indians and a few Mormons . . . He made the most of his opportunities. The images that his writings are full of come from an early and uncluttered time. The adventures he went on were really adventures, not tourist trips."; Wallace Stegner to Waldo Ruess, 30 July 1981, Box 29, Folder 2, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

contact except with the voices over a radio receiver.<sup>114</sup> Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and the rest of the Beats sought freedom by turning away from the capitalist, materialistic conformity of the 1950s. They expressed this freedom through their art, travels, and spirituality.<sup>115</sup> The titles of some of Kerouac's works echo Ruess: *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Lonesome Traveler*, *Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, *Desolation Angels*, *Heaven and other poems*, and *Wind Blown World*. Whether or not he had read Ruess, he seemed to channel him at the end of *Dharma Bums*. Writing of Desolation Peak in North Cascades National Park, he intoned: "Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to the cities."<sup>116</sup> Like Ruess, Kerouac hit the road in search of freedom and adventure, and he recorded his explorations in poetic prose.

Kerouac, like Ruess, walked away from the conformity associated with his era, trying to discover what it meant to be free. Kerouac, too, transmitted these ideas of freedom and nonconformity through the written word, eventually inspiring others. Kerouac made it well known that his adventures and his art went hand in hand. His real life exploits were a form of living art to him, which he documented in his poems and books. Kerouac, like Ruess, was intent on having tremendous depth of experience that he

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<sup>114</sup> Deshae E. Lott, "'All Things are Different Appearances of the Same Emptiness': Buddhism and Jack Kerouac's Nature Writings," in *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 176-80.

<sup>115</sup> Skerl, *Reconstructing the Beats*, 1-3.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (1958; reprint, New York: Buccaneer Books, 1986), 191.

would then later translate into his art. Both believed in living life to the extreme and subsequently documenting their experiences through the written word. Their lives became art.

Like Ruess, Jack Kerouac's spiritual beliefs evolved as he traveled. Born and raised a Catholic, Kerouac was deeply spiritual and spent much of his life exploring Buddhism, especially between 1954 and 1957, before returning to his Catholic roots just prior to his death.<sup>117</sup> Kerouac was interested in silence and meditation, as evidenced by his poem, *How to Meditate*; Ruess and Kerouac each gained much from silence.<sup>118</sup>

Many others have understood the nonconformist vagabond wilderness spirit represented by figures such as Kerouac and Ruess. A fellow adventurer from Ruess's time named Richard Halliburton wrote, "Please don't be distressed because I'm the way I am. Just be grateful that I'm so much happier than most people and trying to go on an up-climbing curve, rather than marking time with those who have come from the regulation mold."<sup>119</sup> A more recent adventurer, Christopher McCandless, who in 1992 met death in the Alaskan wilderness, had similar ideas. "If you want to get more out of life," he wrote, "you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible

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<sup>117</sup> Giamo, *Kerouac*, xvi.

<sup>118</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Pomes All Sizes* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1992), 96.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Halliburton, *Richard Halliburton: His Story of His Life's Adventures as Told in Letters to his Mother and Father* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940), 386.

beauty.”<sup>120</sup> Everett Ruess certainly discovered the beauty of leaving behind “monotonous security” and adopting a “helter-skelter style of life”; yet in the end that style of life destroyed both McCandless and Ruess.

Many have romanticized Ruess’s life and his death. Ruess’s editor, W. L. Rusho, wrote of the universality of Ruess’s ideas and way of life. “Like Everett,” he observed, “we all yearn to cut ourselves off from the comforts and securities of a drab existence at some point in our lives. We too feel a need to enter our own small wilderness in that difficult search for a unique destiny. Everett’s story is the universal story of discovery of self.”<sup>121</sup> Literary critic John P. O’Grady observed that Ruess “plunged into a freedom that contemporary wilderness aficionados only dream about. But freedom comes at the highest price.”<sup>122</sup> O’Grady noted that wilderness enthusiasts dream of freedom. Perhaps people are drawn to Ruess’s words because he modeled freedom as few others have. Perhaps, few are brave enough to truly experience it like Everett Ruess, and for them, simply reading the words of Everett Ruess is enough.

Immersing oneself in silence in nature leads to spiritual revelation according to many religious traditions. The naturalist Mary Austin once wrote, “Great souls that go into the desert come out mystics—saints and prophets—declaring unutterable things.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> McCandless to Ron Franz, between late March - early April 1993, in Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 57.

<sup>121</sup> Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 2.

<sup>122</sup> O’Grady, *Pilgrims to the Wild*, 20-21.

<sup>123</sup> Mary Austin, *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 180.

In another vein, an ancient Zen Master once said, “First you go over to the other side to find out it exists, then you come back to this side to act.”<sup>124</sup> Everett Ruess never came back.

Everett Ruess exhibited all of the characteristics of mystical experiences laid out by William James.<sup>125</sup> First, Ruess’ experiences proved difficult to describe. “As I traveled through the Sierras this year I was privileged to see beauty so far beyond my powers to convey that it almost made me despair,” he struggled to communicate his thoughts but could not find adequate words to describe his experiences. “And when I remember Arizona, I think of two of the most beautiful lakes I have ever seen—one with its wide blue waters that at twilight seem to be reaching into infinity, and another that shone gemlike, far across the vast expanse of yellow desert, and seemed to say, “Follow the gleam.””<sup>126</sup> Second, Ruess’ experiences had noetic qualities in which he felt he acquired inexpressible higher knowledge. He wrote, for example, that he, “felt a still sublimity, looking deep into the coals of my campfire and seeing far beyond them.”<sup>127</sup> Third, Ruess’s experiences were transient; they passed quickly. “I seem always to enjoy things the more intensely because of the certainty that they will not last,” he wrote to his

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in O’Grady, *Pilgrims to the Wild*, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Psychologist and philosopher William James noted that all mystical experiences possess ineffability and noetic qualities while most mystical experiences are transient and passive (that is, grasped by a greater or higher power); James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 332-34.

<sup>126</sup> Everett Ruess, Lakes, 1933, Box 2, Folder 12, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

<sup>127</sup> Ruess to Bill, 18 April 1931, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 39.

friend, Bill.<sup>128</sup> Finally, Ruess felt grasped, held, or overpowered by some greater power. Although awed and overwhelmed by some divine force, Ruess also felt inspired. “I feel more ecstasy [sic] than I can bear,” he exclaimed in a poem titled *The Artist’s Song of Inspiration*.<sup>129</sup> Ruess had all of the elements of mystical experiences, according to the definition set forth by William James.

Ruess vacillated between the love of his family and city-life and the increasing lure of the desert Southwest. In the end, the wilderness won out, as he grew fonder of the region and discovered greater freedom. Although he grew philosophically and spiritually during his solitude, he proved not to be invincible. And that is our loss. A man who held such a passion for life, nature and beauty, with such a talent for expressing it, could have accomplished much more had his life continued.

A few years prior to Ruess’ arrival, a young woman traveled to the Southwest also seeking physical, social, and spiritual freedom. Edith Warner first came on doctor’s orders to help her reclaim her ailing health but she quickly found the Western wilds an escape from mainstream society. Her story, though, wove through several decades. She too had a spiritual awakening brought on by the natural world, but she also befriended and lived for many years with Tilano, a San Ildefonso Pueblo Indian; Warner simultaneously served tea and chocolate cake to the world’s leading physicists as they developed the atomic bomb a few miles from her home. She remained blissfully unaware

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<sup>128</sup> Ruess to Bill, 5 May 1934, in Rusho, ed., *Vagabond for Beauty*, 145-46.

<sup>129</sup> Everett Ruess, *The Artist’s Song of Inspiration*, Box 2, Folder 12, The Everett Ruess Family Papers, 1894-2005, Marriott Libraries Special Collections, The University of Utah.

of their world-changing task. Warner held a less romantic, more grounded view of American Indians than Everett Ruess, the Taos Society of Artists, or Mabel Dodge Luhan.



CHAPTER IV  
EDITH WARNER:  
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AT THE BASE OF LOS ALAMOS MESA

A few years after her arrival in New Mexico, Edith Warner, a strong yet waif-like young woman who had grown up in Pennsylvania, penned a poem describing her new home. It appeared at the beginning of her essay, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, in June, 1931:

New Mexico is  
A land of sunlight and shadow  
Where Indians dance for rain,  
And clean winds blow from purple peaks  
Down to the cactus plain;  
A land of music and silence  
And the Tom-tom’s low refrain,  
Where to whom the vastness speaks  
Must stay or come again.”<sup>1</sup>

Warner eventually came to believe that her arrival in the land of enchantment, and her decision to remain, was no accident. “I am not, and never have been, the guiding hand in my life,” Edith Warner wrote in a Christmas letter to family and friends in 1943 as she reminisced about her life in the Southwest. “Something—what, I do not venture to say—

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Edith Warner and Patrick Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos: Selected Writings of Edith Warner* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 118; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

has prevented what I thought I wanted to do and pushed me into what I eventually did.”<sup>2</sup>

The vastness, the mesas, and something she could not define called the young woman to her new home.

In 1922, after her initial journey to New Mexico from Pennsylvania, Edith Warner experienced a spiritual awakening. After her return to the state, Warner eventually became friends with a multitude of San Ildefonso Pueblo Indians and prominent physicists such as Robert Oppenheimer, and Niels Bohr, who were secretly designing the first atomic bomb in an effort to end a war raging across two continents. She served them in her little house—which doubled as a tearoom—on the banks of the Rio Grande just below The Hill. Like her predecessors, Warner documented her growing connection with the natural world in letters, essays, and journals. She also planned to share her experiences, and her own transformation, by publishing a book-length account of her time in New Mexico but she died before this goal could be realized. Many people whose lives Warner touched wrote glowing accounts of their time spent in her presence—where the past and future met in the timeless present.

After arriving in New Mexico to spend a year recovering from health ailments, Edith Warner was drawn immediately to the natural wonder of the region. Warner soon, “found herself longing for the desert landscape with its magic lights and colors, the Rio Grande gleaming like a great bronze snake in the waste of black rocks tumbled from the mesa.” The young woman found, “freedom in New Mexico,” and she decided that, “if

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<sup>2</sup> Edith Warner, Christmas Greetings and a Report to my Friends, Folder 1, Edith Warner Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

she could, she must find a way to stay.”<sup>3</sup> Like Muir, Ruess, the Taos Society of Artists, and Mabel Dodge Luhan, Warner described a feeling of freedom and a spiritual connection with the natural world that struck soon after her arrival. A few years later she wrote in her journal, “each year I do less of the customary things of our civilization,” she explained.<sup>4</sup> Her connection with the natural world continued to grow. She noted in her journal several years later, “I am glad that the years of adjustment are over and that there has come to me this new relationship with all of earth. I know that I was never so aware of the river and the trees; that I never walked so eagerly looking for the new wild things growing. I know that I have had to grow sufficiently—no, to cast off enough of civilization’s shackles so that the earth spirit could reach me.”<sup>5</sup> The West transformed Warner; she felt liberated from the shackles of civilization. Her presence profoundly impacted those who knew her. During the late 1950s, Peggy Pond Church wrote to physicist Dr. Phillip Morrison for permission to use one of his letters in a book she was writing about Edith Warner and he responded with a glowing summary of his feelings about Warner, “Miss Warner, her home by the river, and her spirit of grace remain a part of everyone at Los Alamos lucky enough to have known her . . . Edith Warner stands in the history of those desperate times as a kind of rainbow . . . a sign that war and bombs

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<sup>3</sup> Peggy Pond Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge: The Story of Edith Warner and Los Alamos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1959), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Edith Warner, journal entry, February, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 161-62.

<sup>5</sup> Warner, journal entry, June 25, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 164.

are not all that men and women are capable of building.”<sup>6</sup> Dr. Morrison shared these sentiments alongside many people whom Warner had met.

Edith Warner’s poor health pushed her toward emigration from Pennsylvania to New Mexico. The beauty she found in the natural world and the kindness, generosity, and acceptance extended by the Tewa people of the San Ildefonso Pueblo provided the magnetism that persuaded her to remain. During the Great Depression and through World War II she grew more connected to the surrounding mountains, river, and mesas. Warner became enamored with the rich past of the Pueblo Indians, while she served her legendary chocolate cake to scientists on the frontier of the nuclear age. Much like Mabel Dodge Luhan, Edith Warner lived for many years with a San Ildefonso Pueblo man named Tilano. Tilano, formally known as Atilano Montoya, had served as Governor of San Ildefonso Pueblo, but was affectionately called Uncle by many who knew him.<sup>7</sup> Although Tilano and Warner’s relationship defies categorization, Warner’s goddaughter, Peter, summed it up best by stating simply that they were spiritual partners.

No academic monographs have thus far been published about Edith Warner. This chapter will utilize Peggy Pond Church’s *The House at Otowi Bridge: The Story of Edith Warner and Los Alamos*; Frank Waters’ novel *The Woman at Otowi Crossing*; Edith

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Phillip Morrison, quoted in Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 99; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> Edith Warner, “Chapter 2,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 83-84; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Warner and Patrick Burns' *In the Shadow of Los Alamos: Selected Writings of Edith Warner*, and other primary sources located in archives throughout New Mexico.

Edith Warner first visited New Mexico in the autumn of 1922. A wise doctor had prescribed for her a life spent outdoors with few obligations after he could find no physical reasons for her ailments. "Perhaps the war and post-war years had been too strenuous. Perhaps subconsciously I was rebelling against the speed of city living," Warner pondered. "Perhaps unknown forces were changing the pattern of my life, for I chose to follow an inexplicable urge which led me to the Southwest." She recalled, "A year in the canyons and mountains of New Mexico followed—a year of walking and riding, of resting on the warm earth—and I knew that I could live happily nowhere else. When of necessity I went away, it was with the determination of returning."<sup>8</sup> In the three decades prior to Warner's arrival in New Mexico, Charles Fletcher Lummis published several books praising the land and its Native people. Further, newspaper reporters gave widespread coverage to the national tour of the Taos Society of Artists. The inward looking mood of the Great Depression, intensified by New Deal programs recapturing the nation's past, led Americans to indulge in nostalgic reminiscence of the frontier and the American Indian. These ideas accompanied Warner as she traveled to the Southwest. Warner rarely mentioned her original home in Pennsylvania or the early years of her life. She was the daughter of a Baptist minister, Patrick Burns noted, "who loved to read and

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<sup>8</sup> Edith Warner, "Chapter 1," *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 68-69; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

had access to and an understanding of the ancient religion of her neighbors at San Ildefonso Pueblo, a combination that created her unique brand of spirituality.”<sup>9</sup>

In Edith Warner’s opinion, her life truly began *after* her arrival in the Southwest. “Darkness hid New Mexico as I paced the platform at Lamy waiting for the little train to Santa Fe,” Warner recalled, “but the stars hung low and brilliant in the midnight sky and the air was crisp and clear. I felt that I had entered another world. In the morning, during the drive to Frijoles, it became a certainty.”<sup>10</sup> Frijoles Canyon is known today as Bandelier National Monument and the arid, desolate, high desert environment surely stood in sharp contrast to her upbringing in humid, green, densely populated, and heavily industrialized Pennsylvania. Warner wrote that she arrived, “from Philadelphia as a veritable tenderfoot.”<sup>11</sup> That would soon change.

Edith Warner’s hometown served as an industrial hub of the United States, providing goods and services to all corners of the nation and abroad. The Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce had proudly declared the city as, “the workshop of the world.” Boosters of the city still proclaimed this motto almost a century after the Civil War. “From roughly 1880 through the 1920s,” historian Billy Scranton observed, “Philadelphia’s industrial districts supported an array of mills and plants whose diversity

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<sup>9</sup> Burns, in Warner and Burns, *In The Shadows of Los Alamos*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, “A Tenderfoot in New Mexico,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 134.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

has scarcely been matched anywhere in the history of manufacturing.”<sup>12</sup> New Mexico seemed like another world to Edith Warner.

Northern New Mexico appeared ethereal to Warner, which compounded the uncertainty she felt about her own future. “There was no hint to an untrained eye that here high above the river a culture had flourished long before the coming of the Spaniards,” she observed. “There was no warning that on the Los Alamos mesa, a few miles to the north and west, a new era was destined to begin. Nor did I dream on that still day in early October how this very plateau in the shadow of the Jemez Mountains would affect my own future.”<sup>13</sup> The village of San Ildefonso rested nearby; it had moved several times, according to their oral history, but it had been at its current location since the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Their traditions, religion, and dances had been handed down from generation to generation for centuries. In late December, her host, Father Boyd, drove her to the pueblo for the first time in his old topless Ford to bring some candy for his friends there. The road through the sparsely populated region was new to her. “It skirted the eastern side of Buckman mesa and climbing gradually from the river topped a rise beyond which lay a magic land,” Warner reminisced. “On that day pearl clouds floated above snowcapped mountains and cast shadows on the barranca [ravine or gorge],

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<sup>12</sup> Billy B. Scranton, Ph.D., “Overview,” from Workshop of the World: A Selective Guide to the Industrial Archeology of Philadelphia (Oliver Evans Press, 1990; Adapted for the internet in 2007), accessed July 18, 2012, <http://www.workshopoftheworld.com/overview/overview.html>

<sup>13</sup> Warner, “A Tenderfoot in New Mexico,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 21.

gold and rose in the sunlight,” she recalled. “Later from the house by the river I was to know the mesa in all its moods, to see the barranca glow as well as withdraw within itself in somber hue. This I did not even dream as we drove toward the Pueblo and the Black Mesa towering it.”<sup>15</sup> She met a San Ildefonso man who, “spoke and the intensity of his face remains even though the outlines have faded. The never forgotten words were, ‘Last night we danced in the kiva—every man, woman and child. Our hearts were right. Today the snow came.’”<sup>16</sup> She would soon come to understand his words more fully. Although, she wished to stay in New Mexico, she lacked the financial resources to do so. She grudgingly went back to Pennsylvania, resolving to come back to stay.

In September of 1927, Warner returned to New Mexico, where she was to tutor a boy near Los Alamos over the winter. She was determined to find a way to remain in the region she had found so soothing. “My ideas of how I might earn a living in a sparsely inhabited country had been numerous but not practical for an unmarried woman of thirty-five with no capital,” Warner explained.<sup>17</sup> Peggy Pond Church noted, “The most impractical of these ideas did not compare with the job that Fate, half-smiling, half-severe, seems to have had in mind for Edith Warner from the very beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Warner, “A Tenderfoot in New Mexico,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 137.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 69-70; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>18</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 28.



Warner's plans, "had not included taking care of freight or selling gasoline and Coca-Cola in an ugly frame house at Otowi Bridge."<sup>19</sup> However, that is exactly what the director of the Los Alamos Ranch School, Albert J. Connell, suggested she do.<sup>20</sup>

Mr. Connell had searched Santa Fe for a responsible person to live at the Otowi station. Although he was, according to Warner, "an Irishman who usually obtained his objective, whether that was a boy for the school or a lawn in a dry land," he had not been able to find someone willing to live at Otowi Station for a mere twenty-five dollars a month. He ran into Edith Warner at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe. She was desperately trying to find a way to stay in New Mexico and earn a living, although her last hope had evaporated earlier that day.<sup>21</sup> "'You want to stay in this country, don't you?' he asked." She replied, "'Yes, but—'" He cut her off, continuing, "'You can rent the house from wages. How soon can you arrange to take over?'" Warner knew she must decide immediately. Her family could not help her make a decision as they had never been to the region and could not understand the circumstances. "They had helped me as long as they could, and then had become resigned to my solving the problems alone. They must have had faith in the Lord—and perhaps some in me, for they never put any obstacles in my way," Warner explained. "Return east I would not," she knew without a doubt.

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<sup>19</sup> Warner, "Chapter 1," *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 69-70; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>20</sup> Warner, "Chapter 1," *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 68; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

“Waiting for another opportunity was too much of a gamble. His offer would at least tide me over until I could find a better solution. I decided to try it.”<sup>22</sup> The following day Warner journeyed to San Ildefonso and rented the house from renowned potter Maria Martinez and her husband Julian; the Indian Service and the Pueblo Council approved the agreement. Adam, their son who had lived there previously, agreed to move the freight and chop her wood. “So with many doubts and fears,” Warner explained, “I cast my lot with this house . . .”<sup>23</sup>

Edith Warner believed that her house stood apart—it stood between the Anglo world and the Pueblo Indian world. She meant this figurative as well as literally. It was, she wrote, “a house destined to play a part in the lives of the men and women who brought into being the atomic bomb.” In 1928, most people in this region of New Mexico lived in flat-roofed adobe houses that seemed to blend in with the earth and surroundings. This house, however, stood out. Warner, at first, thought it was “ugly” with its pitched roof, wooden frame, and dull tan exterior. It appeared weathered. Its only adornment, Warner tells us, “was a large Coca-Cola sign on the small front porch, beside which a gasoline pump stood forlornly.” The house occupied a shadeless, desolate, desert acre of land with the exception a few junipers, prickly pear cacti, and spice bushes. Small cottonwood trees added greenery by the riverbank. She found the

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<sup>22</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 69-70; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>23</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 70; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

neighboring well-house charming, however.<sup>24</sup> The tracks of the Denver and Rio Grande, railroad passed by a few hundred feet to the west. An old boxcar served as the train station. It was painted the same dull tan color as the house and proclaimed the name of the station in large lettering, OTOWI. The tracks ran parallel to the Rio Grande, which was crossed by Otowi Bridge, a suspension bridge, to the south. The gravel road led to Santa Fe, roughly twenty five miles southeast and toward the westerly mountains.<sup>25</sup> “It had been one of Edith’s wild dreams, in the weeks since Mr. Connell had persuaded her to live there, that in addition to selling gasoline and cokes she might run the place as a tearoom.”<sup>26</sup> She had no idea she would soon host some of the brightest minds in the world as they changed the face of history.

The first two rooms of the house had originally been built as part of a logging camp known as Campito. The railroad had hired some San Ildefonso Indians to haul logs from the mountains to Otowi Station to make railroad ties. Warner reflected, “even now their children, wanting to visit the house at the bridge, say, ‘Take us to Campito.’” A Portuguese man who had worked at the logging camp purchased the house and moved it to the other side of the railroad tracks. The house narrowly missed being crushed by a passing train in the process. He obtained permission from the Pueblo Council to rent this

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<sup>24</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 66; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>25</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 66-67; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>26</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 32.

acre of land; the entire area was part of the San Ildefonso Indian reservation and non-Indians were prohibited from owning the land. Shorty dug a well, added a room, and opened a store. Although few people frequented his little store, he offered canned food, soft drinks, and tobacco. Evidence suggests he may have sold alcohol during the prohibition years, which likely caused him to quickly move on. The main reason Shorty lived by the station, however, was to watch the freight from the railroad. A private school for boys called Los Alamos Ranch School lay ten miles to the west, and two thousand feet higher in elevation, on Los Alamos Mesa. The boarding school boasted horses, dairy cows, and a commissary; all supplies for the school arrived at Otowi Station by train before being loaded onto trucks for the steep climb up the mesa. Someone needed to watch the freight after it arrived at Otowi and wait for the truck to arrive from the school, which came three times a week; Shorty took the job.<sup>27</sup>

Maria and Julian Martinez purchased the house from Shorty when he left because it was on their land. Their son Adam and his wife built a fourth room and moved there to watch the freight. They found their new life to be lonely, however, and moved back to the Pueblo to be nearer their friends and family. “This left the little house unoccupied, the freight unprotected,” Warner wrote, “and soon led to a crisis.”<sup>28</sup>

Late in her life, Edith Warner attempted to write an autobiographical account of her time and experiences in New Mexico at the request of friends and family. After

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<sup>27</sup> Warner, “Chapter 1,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 67; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

reading her Christmas letters each year, they wanted to hear more about her adventures. They found Warner, the house, and the story surrounding them, distinctive. Although she only completed a statement of purpose, a foreword, and two chapters, the result is revealing. In her typically humble manner, she framed her book around her house rather than selecting herself as the main character. Peggy Pond Church borrowed Warner's approach when she wrote about Edith Warner and her home in *The House at Otowi Bridge*. Warner lived in the house for twenty years. "It stood between the indigenous Pueblo culture and the new transplanted Anglo culture, represented recently by the new Los Alamos and the atomic era," Warner explained. The house's character, she maintained, was a mixture of the two nearby cultures and, in turn, it affected and influenced those who spent time there. She planned to share the house's story against a backdrop of Pueblo life through the ever-changing seasons, "to show the relationships of individual Indians with the house and their influence upon its growth; to weave through the record the intangible quality of the house."<sup>29</sup> Like Mabel Dodge Luhan, Warner never fully broke free of her gender role. Warner's focus on the house as the main character of her story shows how she viewed herself primarily as a homemaker. She explained that the Indians in her tale are her friends, and that, "Because I respect Pueblo reticence there are some things which cannot be written, but I do not think the omission

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<sup>29</sup> Warner, "Statement of Purpose," *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 61; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

affects the whole.”<sup>30</sup> Philip Deloria notes in *Playing Indian* that, “Indian people have been embraced and rejected, frequently humiliated, and occasionally empowered.”<sup>31</sup> While John Muir and Everett Ruess exhibited most of these traits in their perceptions of American Indians, Warner embraced Pueblo culture and hers was a more realistic and less romantic style than Mabel Dodge Luhan. Warner’s ominous book title was *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*. Since she needed to continue working as she wrote, she only had time to document the beginning of her tale. “The way it unfolds and what hidden meanings arise I have no way of knowing now,” she noted enigmatically.<sup>32</sup> She never completed her book.

Warner felt that unseen forces acted upon her and the house. “Recently certain aspects have begun to clarify and the whole to take on some form, but it is still a matter of going back into the years—almost feeling with my hands for what became part of the structure. I think it has to be brought out into the open and put into words before true evaluation is possible. For this, time is necessary.”<sup>33</sup> Warner added, “Because the old

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<sup>30</sup> Warner, “Statement of Purpose,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 61-62; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>31</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 254.

<sup>32</sup> Warner, “Statement of Purpose,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 62; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

house had come to have meaning for those who knew it, I have tried to record the years of its growing, and the way in which the Atomic Era brought those years to a close.”<sup>34</sup>

As World War II raged, early in 1942, the U.S. government decided to find an isolated area where scientists could come together to design an atomic bomb. J. Robert Oppenheimer helped choose the location for the project. Since his family owned a Ranch in the Pecos Mountains, he had known the area for many years. Historian Ferenc Szasz noted, “Here he was to combine his two great loves—physics and New Mexico.”<sup>35</sup> The government already owned much of the land and it soon acquired the rest, including the boys’ ranch school located near Edith Warner, which received notification that it must close. “Oppenheimer assumed that facilities would be needed to house perhaps thirty scientists and their families,” Szasz observed. “The ‘realists’ of the time argued that they would need room for at least 500. At the end of the war, close to 6,500 people were living on the Hill.”<sup>36</sup> Oppenheimer personally recruited many of the top scientists. The area had unmatched secretiveness; many people who lived and worked at Los Alamos did not realize the purpose of their mission although many knew it was to aid in the war effort. “It is probably safe to say,” Szasz noted, “that never before in the history of the

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<sup>34</sup> Warner, “Foreword,” *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 65; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>35</sup> Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Story of the Trinity Site Nuclear Explosion July 16, 1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

human race have so many brilliant minds been gathered together at one place.”<sup>37</sup> Szasz observed, “Visitors walking through the spacious fuller Lodge at lunch might see four to five Nobel Prize winners dining at the same time. If they had been able to divine the future, they would have known that seven other men would also become Nobel laureates.”<sup>38</sup> Edith Warner hosted many of these scientists in her tearoom, including Nobel Prize winning physicist Niels Bohr and Robert Oppenheimer. She came to know them well, although she never knew what they were working on. “When one considers how many people worked at Los Alamos . . . the army’s success in concealing its purpose was phenomenal. It became, indeed, ‘the best kept secret of the war.’” Szasz noted, “With few exceptions, most of the Los Alamos wives were uncertain what their husbands were doing in the Tech Area.” Szasz observed, “Bernice Brode, Ruth Marshack, and Laura Fermi all confessed that they really understood the project only after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.”<sup>39</sup> The news of Hiroshima and the scientists’ mission surprised Warner, although she had suspected atomic research early on.

Edith Warner reflected on the words of her friend Ignacio during her first sojourn to New Mexico in 1922. “If, when we dance, our hearts are right, the rain will come,” he had said. One part of his assertion, in particular, stood out to her; “If our hearts are right . . .” Dancing for rain entailed much more than mere dancing. “These words stirred something deep in Edith Warner. She began to realize that the Pueblo dances are not

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 23.



simply magical devices to control the forces of nature. They are a means by which men bring their own lives into harmony with the order and beauty of the world around them.”<sup>40</sup> “In the beautiful still world,” Warner wrote in her narrative, ‘I kept pondering Ignacio’s words.’ “She was still pondering them on that August day nearly twenty-five years later when the report of the atomic bomb flashed round the world from devastated Hiroshima, the bomb that had been made at Los Alamos, only twenty-five miles from San Ildefonso where the Indians still dance in Summer to help the green corn grow.”<sup>41</sup> The physicists succeeded in controlling the forces of nature on a grand scale; she knew the importance of finding harmony to balance this new destructive force. Warner always maintained that fate or some higher power had brought her to this particular place at this particular time.

Edith Warner progressively discarded the trappings of civilization after her move to the Southwest. “We had no radio and mail came in about once a week, but days were so filled there was not time for loneliness,” Warner remembered. “It took me practically a whole day to go to Jemez Springs on horseback for mail—past Vallecitos de Los Indios, over the long mesa trail, down and down into the canyon past the thick walls of the mission ruin and into the village beside the Jemez river. Those trips were wearisome but they gave me confidence in the country, the people and myself.”<sup>42</sup> Her confidence

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<sup>40</sup> Warner and Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Warner, “A Tenderfoot in New Mexico,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 140-41.

continued to grow and she never wrote of missing the comforts of the middle class lifestyle she had left behind in the East. “This afternoon as I ironed, I was thinking about money. Unexpectedly during the week enough had come in to pay a bill that I did not see how I could meet,” she remembered on another occasion. “I recalled how frequently that had happened when I had done what seemed to me my utmost. I recalled, too, how a wise old man had taught me not to worry about such things. But habit is strong, nor have I learned to live as simply as he. Yet each year I do less of the customary things of our civilization.”<sup>43</sup> She learned new customs from her Tewa pueblo neighbors as her prior life faded into memory and she began to gain faith in unseen powers. “I have learned out here that civilization has disadvantages, and I am grateful to the ancestor from whom I inherited the ability to adapt myself to circumstances . . .”<sup>44</sup> Warner came to appreciate her “uncivilized” life; however, she differed from Mabel Dodge Luhan in that she did not romanticize or actively promote Pueblo culture as a real alternative to industrializing society.<sup>45</sup> We can only guess what she intended to share in the book she never completed.

It is clear, however, that Warner became increasingly grateful for her sojourn in the sparsely populated region. “And so when I came almost a decade ago, seeking rest

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<sup>43</sup> Warner, journal entry, February, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 162.

<sup>44</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 151; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 100-101.

for a weary body and brain, the land of mañana claimed me for its own. For more than a year I lay on the warm earth, rode and walked the trails, began to know the people. And when I had to go away, I knew that someday I would come back to stay,” she recalled fondly. “Cities with their noises and people thronging were scarcely endurable, and always there was the pulling force of this land. So at last I came again when the aspens made great splotches of gold on the mountains, came to stay always,” Warner reminisced. “All through the fall and winter I sought a corner to make my own, in which I might eke out an existence. And when the cottonwoods began to leaf, I came here where the Rio Grande enters the canyon made by the great mesas that guard me.”<sup>46</sup> She often spoke of feeling protected by the impressive mesas.

Warner increasingly appreciated her distance from the industrializing world. “From out the canyon once a day, a whistle shrieks above the rush of the river, the narrow gauge leaving supplies and guest at my door as it puffs on its way northward. Were it not for these evidences of it, and the occasional airplane overhead, I could almost forget civilization,” she mused contentedly. “The rural route comes only to my nearest neighbor’s ranch, a mile away. A telephone is impossible. Water is drawn from a well. Fireplaces heat my house and candles light it. Nor would I have it otherwise.”<sup>47</sup> She did

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<sup>46</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 118-119; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>47</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 119; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

not feel that she had given up anything when she left the East but, rather, that she had gained something immeasurable in the West. She felt the simplicity of her new life, and the lives of her Pueblo neighbors were more authentic than the lives of people in urban America. She had the freedom to make her own rules without regard for social conformity. Sometimes Tilano helped her escape even farther, “and when I have to get away from all of civilization, it is two horses he brings to take me up on the mesas where clean winds blow and there is only silence.”<sup>48</sup> Warner repeatedly remarked on the importance of silence in her life, much like Everett Ruess. She preferred the slower methods of travel such as walking or on horseback. “A car takes one all too quickly through the canyons, over the mesas,” she clarified.<sup>49</sup> It was highly unusual for a woman from the middle class to voluntarily embrace poverty in this manner and to turn away from most of the comforts offered by modernity such as electricity and automobiles.

Warner eventually came to believe that her distance from heavily populated urban areas proved vital for her own spiritual development. Responding to her goddaughter’s questions about her spiritual experiences, Warner wrote, “You should have no shame about suggesting the feeling is ‘revelation’—perhaps . . . humility together with deep gratitude. . . . Two different paths may eventually lead to the comprehension of man. The

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<sup>48</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 118; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 147; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

first, revelation, is a direct road, but is closed to a great many people and independent of rational thought,” she expounded. “Those who can make use of it are fortunate. I would amend it to read ‘of man and of the spirit.’” Warner clarified, indicating she thought it possible for humans to comprehend spirit as well as man. “What you and I feel certainly is everywhere but in some parts of the earth is more shut off by the material of our culture.” Warner believed she had been able to get more in touch with the spirit world in her natural setting. “Eventually one feels and then knows that it is within man, too. Revelation itself in its presentation to man is not an everyday thing. As you have learned, it can be repeated or recaptured. Eventually it is possible, I believe . . . to have its deep silent wonder permanently,” she noted. Warner had experienced revelation many times herself and recognized it in others, although she found it difficult to describe. “I think also that it is possible for that to be so and yet the individual to lead a useful busy life. I am thinking of Bohr.” Warner felt that Niels Bohr was particularly in touch with the spiritual realm. “I am feeling my way here and may not be too clear,” She struggled to find words to adequately describe the mystical. “All sorts of thoughts open up in the connection with the world and its dire situation and this power so little used. Those ancient civilizations had it and lost it. It would seem almost as though too much material advance were an obstruction.”<sup>50</sup> Warner felt that a simple life close to nature opened up the spiritual realm for her.

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<sup>50</sup> Warner, undated letter to Peter, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadows of Los Alamos*, 191.

Similarly, Warner lamented the assimilation policies that affected her Tewa pueblo neighbors. A youth named Ignacio was visiting his pueblo home for the Fiesta after living at an Indian boarding school. “He seemed not quite an Indian, dressed as he was in the American clothes provided at the school,” Warner observed. “I liked the pleasant bashful lad and kept hoping all through the next day, as I watched him stand aloof and apart that soon he could leave the school and come back into the pueblo as one of his own people. I question the wisdom of schools that tend to break down the ancient civilization and give only a smattering of our own.”<sup>51</sup> She supported and held views similar to John Collier, commissioner of Indian Affairs. Historian Kenneth Philp noted of Collier, “Not only was he a strong advocate of protecting and guaranteeing Indian rights to their own religion and culture, but he saw in the communal existence of the Native Americans a model for reforming society at large.”<sup>52</sup> He viewed the Taos Pueblo as an ancient city with a highly advanced culture, far superior to the civilization of the East. Warner, however, was less outspoken than John Collier or Mabel Dodge Luhan about these beliefs.

Warner came to value the culture of her neighbors and her friend Ci-ya-pi had even helped her learn Tewa. “I realize now that teaching me his language was more than fun. It helped to bridge the gulf of racial heritage between us. It was a reaching toward

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<sup>51</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 148-149; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier’s Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), xi.

each other that comes in friendship.”<sup>53</sup> Her friendship with members of the San Ildefonso pueblo ran deep. “When I am invited to come into the kitchen, or the inner family room, I know I am counted a friend. And if, when I chance to visit a home at mealtime, an extra cup and plate are placed and I am asked to share the meal, I know I am, as Quebi said, ‘one of us.’”<sup>54</sup> She was thoroughly accepted by her Tewa friends, whom she viewed with respect. “All this is neighborliness in the land of mañana. It matters not that the color of skin be different, that language be not the same, that even the gods of our father be known by a different name,” she explained. “We are people, the same kind of human beings who live and love and go on, and I find myself ever forgetting that my friends are known as Indians and I am a white woman born. Perhaps that is why we are neighbors, even down to our hearts.”<sup>55</sup> Historian Sherry Smith noted that, “Some sought to find *themselves* through immersion in an alien yet attractive culture.”<sup>56</sup> Warner seemed to find herself after her immersion in Pueblo culture although she may not have

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<sup>53</sup> Warner, “My friend—A Pueblo Indian,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 155; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>54</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 121; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>55</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 127; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>56</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

sought that from the outset. She differed from Mabel Dodge Luhan in this regard. Luhan romanticized Taos Pueblo and put the people of Taos and their culture on a pedestal, whereas Warner viewed all people as fundamentally the same—human.

Over time, Warner came to view life much like her Tewa friends did. After her friend Ci-ya-pi had died, she recalled, “In the morning they took his body to the church for burial but I could not bear to go. To me he did not belong there. I found myself going sobbing down the road he had followed so many times when he came to see me, aware only of loss, of emptiness. Finally I looked up toward the west and there came like a flash the deep certainty that he had preceded me and gone on to the mountains! I knew he was happy there,” she explained.<sup>57</sup> Later, she noted, “By afternoon clouds had hidden the clear sky of morning and a gentle rain fell here, as in the Pueblo. My friend had gone but he had sent the rain. Now, when the winds blow, when the rains fall gently, when special days come in the Pueblo, he is very near and I am happily aware of him. Without a vital friendship between us, that could not be.”<sup>58</sup> She truly came to perceive life differently after living in the Southwest. “Several years passed, and another Christmas Eve approached. When the sun had gone below the rim of the big mesa to the west, and the dusk had begun to come silently from the canyon, Nana tsideh laid a little hollow

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<sup>57</sup> Warner, “My friend—A Pueblo Indian,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 155; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



square of pitch wood outside the house. He lighted it, saying a prayer for those who draw mankind on that night—be they Christ Child or gods of darker skin.”<sup>59</sup>

Edith Warner came to value Tewa religion and the dances she observed, not as a romanticized novelty but, rather, as sacred practices. “It was truly a prayer and a people at worship. There was undoubtedly a supreme being in that plaza, and I felt it was a sacrilege to be watching their worship. I found myself unconsciously bowing my head in recognition of the prayer.”<sup>60</sup> She lived somewhere on the slippery, hazy border between white, middle class, eastern-born outsider and fully accepted and participatory insider. On another occasion, after writing a glowing account of the San Ildefonso Basket Dance, Edith Warner concluded angrily, “Do you wonder I become indignant when a Commissioner, who never saw a dance, forbids these ceremonial dances? He made an awful mistake . . .”<sup>61</sup> She later became grateful for the efforts of John Collier, once he had become commissioner of Indian affairs, to protect Native Americans’ cultural and religious practices. Warner struggled unsuccessfully to find words to convey her

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<sup>59</sup> Warner, “Christmas Eve in an Indian Pueblo,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 132; originally published in *New Mexico Sentinel*, December 22, 1937; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>60</sup> Warner, “The Basket Dance,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 145; Box 1, Folder 6, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>61</sup> Warner, “The Basket Dance,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 146; Box 1, Folder 6, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico; Warner is referring to commissioner of Indian Affairs, Charles H. Burke. Burke issued a series of edicts condemning what he called “pagan,” and “anti-American,” Indian dances and practices during his tenure during the 1920s.

feelings, “Perhaps I can picture to you the dancing of real Americans—although words are futile.”<sup>62</sup> To Warner, these friends were the real Americans, a notion far ahead of her time.<sup>63</sup> William James, as discussed earlier, noted the ineffability of mystical states; Warner repeatedly wrote of her inability to understand or explain many of her experiences. She realized that, “Most of the Indians are nominally Catholics but they have not given up their own religion . . .”<sup>64</sup> Many of the traditions she witnessed had evolved during centuries of Spanish rule in the region and reflected a mixing and blending of religious rituals. Although many Americans during this time viewed Indians as timeless and unchanging, Warner witnessed, and regularly commented on, a far different reality involving cultural blending.

Edith Warner was touched by the religion practiced by her San Ildefonso friends in a way that far transcended tourists witnessing these same events. “Again we took our gifts to the Pueblo and listened while the children sang their Christmas songs. Then, through the still cold moonlight, we drove to San Felipe and waited. Midnight came and went, with now and then the church bell ringing and Indians going into the church to pray. At intervals a drummer and a hunter came from the church to go through the

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<sup>62</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 146; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>63</sup> In fact, the term “native” was commonly used in New Mexico during this time to refer to Spanish speaking people, especially those in northern New Mexico.

<sup>64</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 148; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

village calling to the people,” she explained. “Through the hours we waited, looking at the church in the moonlight and behind it a mesa carved against the sky. I wanted only to be still and passive to the waves that beat upon me from the air. Then a call came to me through the clear cold of the first hours of Christmas and I knew that the Buffalo Hunter had gone up into the hills. Again and again it came, each time rending more civilized layers of me until it laid bare something deep and ageless.”<sup>65</sup> She felt in touch with their religion as her former, civilized life fell away. “. . . the rich low tones of the song and the rhythm of the movement filled me. From the earth itself and from the house made from the earth it flowed into me—and I can find no word for *it*.”<sup>66</sup> By *it*, Warner may be relating the mystical experience of divinity she often experienced, although she has difficulty explaining it. Although Warner often spoke of spirituality or alluded to divinity, she seldom labeled it by calling it God or associating it with any particular religion. She allowed the mystery to exist, while appreciating its beauty.

Edith Warner knew great freedom in the Southwest; she broke away from conformity and social expectations she associated with civilized society. In 1923, faced with the reality of her imminent return to Pennsylvania, she had, “found herself longing for the desert landscape with its magic lights and colors, the Rio Grande gleaming like a

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<sup>65</sup> Warner, “Christmas Eve in an Indian Pueblo,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 132-133; originally published in *New Mexico Sentinel*, December 22, 1937; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>66</sup> Warner, “Cañon People,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 129; originally published in *Space* as “Earth Feeling: Cañon People,” September, 1934; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

great bronze snake in the waste of black rocks tumbled from the mesa. She knew that her year of freedom in New Mexico was almost over, and yet, if she could, she must find a way to stay.”<sup>67</sup> Her interlude from civilization had allowed her the freedom to break away from the formal expectations of a white, middle class woman of her era. “The fireplace is the center of a home in this country and it is always there the chairs are drawn after a meal, and to it a guest is invited to come. At first I formally sat on a chair, but now I feel free to do as instinct bids me and sit on a low stool or the hearth. I really like to, and then it tends to break down any barriers of difference that might seem to exist.”<sup>68</sup> Following her return, each year, she grew more comfortable in New Mexico.

Edith Warner’s spirituality had an impact on her friends and family, who consistently remarked about it following Warner’s passing. ““We knew others were touched and helped,” Edith’s sister, Velma, told Peggy Church, ‘but was it as strongly spiritual to them as to us?’”<sup>69</sup> Edith’s goddaughter, Henrietta (“Peter”) Myers Miller, wrote that her husband, Earle, ‘was so much in awe of [Edith] (I think most men felt that way about her).’ Peter had accepted Edith as her spiritual mentor. ‘I believe most eastern religions say when you are ready a teacher will come,’ Peter wrote. ‘I believe

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<sup>67</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Warner, “My Neighbors, The Pueblo Indians,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 123; originally published in *Neighborhood, A Settlement Quarterly*, Volume 4, #2, June 1931; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>69</sup> Letter, Velma Warner to Peggy Pond Church, quoted in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 2; Box 1, Folder 21, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

[Edith] was as close to becoming free of self as anyone I've known.”<sup>70</sup> Selflessness is, indeed, an aspect of many religions. The Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu text, states, “For those who wish to climb the mountain of spiritual awareness, the path is selfless work. For those who have attained the summit of union with the Lord, the path is stillness and peace.”<sup>71</sup> The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Siddhartha, is credited with saying, “Those whose minds are shaped by selfless thoughts give joy when they speak or act.”<sup>72</sup> Italian Catholic Saint Francis of Assisi observed, “Above all the grace and the gifts that Christ gives to his beloved is that of overcoming self.”<sup>73</sup> Winifred Fisher, one of Warner’s friends, noted that Edith, ““was a sort of religion herself.””<sup>74</sup> Warner’s goddaughter commented that, “Edith believed that true knowledge was for all—as a group, not as single individuals. Much of her fascination with the religion of Native Americans had to do with group beliefs and consciousness. . . . Although she was a deeply spiritual person, Edith would never have considered herself a prophet. She loved

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<sup>70</sup> Letters, Peter Miller to Peggy Pond Church, quoted in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 2; Box 1, Folder 19, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>71</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, quoted in Easwaran Eknath, *Words to Live By: Short Readings of Daily Wisdom* (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 2005), 185.

<sup>72</sup> Buddha, quoted in Easwaran Eknath, *Words to Live By: A Daily Guide to Leading an Exceptional Life* (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>73</sup> Jay Bakker, *Fall to Grace; A revolution of God, & Society* (New York: FaithWords, 2011), Chapter 8, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Winifred Fisher quote taken from letter, Velma Warner to Peggy Pond Church, quoted in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 2; Box 1, Folder 21, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

the phrase ‘flute of the gods’ and wrote, ‘I had no particular power but acted as [a] medium through which [a] source of strength could flow.’ In a letter to her goddaughter she wrote, ‘. . . Christ tried to make his teachings the important thing but people used the crucifixion to make it him. . . . Eventually one should be able to make a high place within for one’s own use. . . . The knowledge that I thought was beyond man’s compass can be so strong in a human being that it radiates and yet it does not make him a ‘master.’”<sup>75</sup>

Warner, again, refers to the noetic qualities of her experiences, which William James discussed in his description of mystical states.

Edith Warner often personified nature, much like John Muir, the Taos artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Everett Ruess. “Just below the bridge at Otowi the river which has been spreading widely between its gravelly banks begins to flow past strong resistant rock into a canyon formed by two great mesas. The Indians call the spot Po-sah-con-gay, “the place where the river makes a noise,” she explained. “As she listened that night,” just after her initial arrival, “Edith began to hear more than meaningless noise in the sound of the water. The river seemed to make of its noise a song, a song . . . she thought of through the years as the melody of living.”<sup>76</sup> The singing river became the song of her life. “As the stars began one by one to fill the deep sky above her, Edith Warner found the great age and deep-rootedness of the mesas comforting. Through them she felt connected with a source of strength within herself, something as old as the mesas, as

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<sup>75</sup> Letters, Peter Miller to Peggy Pond Church, quoted in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 2-3; Box 1, Folder 19, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>76</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 34.

wise, as unshakable. Utterly alone though she was on the first evening, she felt that the wordless land had accepted her and that if she too had endurance, life in the little house could be deeply satisfying.”<sup>77</sup> Warner often wrote of how the wise mesas comforted her. “My friend was wrong who said that this country was so old it does not matter what we Anglos do here. What we do anywhere matters but especially here,” she explained, emphasizing, “It matters very much. Mesas and mountains, rivers and trees, winds and rains are as sensitive to the actions and thoughts of humans as we are to their forces. They take into themselves what we give off and give it out again.”<sup>78</sup> Warner spoke of nature as being alive, having human, lifelike characteristics. “It was clear and cold and the stars, that seemed so near, lured me out into the night.”<sup>79</sup> Warner felt that, perhaps, the mesas had beckoned her to New Mexico. “It may have been their calling me through the years that made me so determined, for no good reason, to come to this cañon and mesa country seeking rest for a weary body; and finally to return to live always in the shadow of these great mesas—Shumo-ayde and To-tavi-kadi, Tomo and Tuyo. For it is here my roots have gone deep, and while the land can never be mine legally, being part of a Pueblo Indian reservation, it *is* mine because it claimed me for its own.”<sup>80</sup> She was

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>78</sup> Warner, journal entry, June 25, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 163-64.

<sup>79</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 149; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>80</sup> Warner, “Cañon People,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 128; originally published in *Space* as “Earth Feeling: Cañon People,” September, 1934; Box

accepted by both by the land and by the Tewa people, which helped her feel connected, rooted with an unshakable foundation; her outer world and inner world mirrored one another.

Edith Warner's friends and family often commented on the spirituality that surrounded her. "Many people feel that through a series of mystic experiences, Edith Warner had reached a union with a deeper self—a form of enlightenment—and just being near her could affect a person spiritually," Patrick Burns explained.<sup>81</sup> Peggy Pond Church noted that, ". . . she had such faith in the healing quality of silence."<sup>82</sup> Burns elaborated, "Edith Warner was a complex and clairvoyant woman who realized the irony and interest of her life story. She knew early on that she was on a spiritual journey and eagerly sought another level of understanding beyond that of most women or men of her generation. She followed destiny to the Rio Grande, and in this solitude she nurtured an inner growth." He continued, "She adopted a way of living and thinking that was at odds with everyday life in her culture, as was her pursuit of a kind of knowing that doesn't measure and probe. That she was so quiet just added to the myth."<sup>83</sup> The West and its Native people, far from her hometown in Pennsylvania, provided the environment Warner needed to pursue a spiritual connection with the natural world.

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1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>81</sup> Burns, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadows of Los Alamos*, 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> Church, *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> Burns, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadows of Los Alamos*, 7.



She was very different from the woman she had been back East. “I wonder if these cliffs that have been reflecting the old sun’s rays all through the years know how they calm the ruffled, troubled soul of me? I wonder if the people who lived in these cliff caves so long ago felt as I do the sureness, the timelessness of them and so walked calmly through life,” she pondered in an essay. “When I come here and sit on the stone worn smooth and hollowed a bit by moccasined feet, with my back against one cliff, so solid and assuring, around me the entrances to caves where people lived, loved and died, my mind clears as do troubled waters when the sand sinks to the bottom of the pool. Perhaps I can make it clear.”<sup>84</sup> Here, Warner seems to reference eastern religions that advocated clearing the mind.<sup>85</sup> In a Christmas letter to family and friends in 1943, Warner jokingly wrote that the theme music was, “the song of the Rio Grande and the Canyon wren,” the director was, “Fate,” and the narrator was, “a fearsome woman, whose roots have been

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<sup>84</sup> Warner, “Fiesta Time at San Ildefonso,” in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 146; Box 1, Folder 5, Peggy Pond Church Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>85</sup> For example, Zen Buddhist author and teacher Rebecca Z. Shafir similarly advises her readers, “Make a habit of several minutes of quiet meditation every day. To listen well, you have to first settle the internal noise. Think of your mind as a glassful of water and sand. Shake up this container and notice how the mix of sand and water makes it difficult to see through. Let the container sit for several minutes and watch how, as the sand settles to the bottom, the water clears. This is essentially what happens to our bodies during breathing practice,” Rebecca Z. Shafir, *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Pub. House, 2000), 78.

shaken but still are deep in the soil of New Mexico.”<sup>86</sup> Warner credited fate for leading her west to find comfort and stability far from modern conveniences.

Edith Warner’s Christmas letter of 1945 describes the crescendo of the story: The climax came on that August day when the report of the atomic bomb flashed around the world. It seemed fitting that it was Kitty Oppenheimer who, coming for vegetables, brought the news. I had not known what was being done up there, though in the beginning I had suspected atomic research. Much was now explained. Now I can tell you that Conant and Compton came in through the kitchen door to eat ragout and chocolate cake; that Fermi, Allison, Teller, Parsons came many times; that Oppenheimer was the man I knew in pre-war years and who made it possible for the Hill people to come down; that Hungarians, Swiss, Germans, Italians, Austrians, French and English have been serious and gay around the candlelit table. It has been an incredible experience for a woman who chose to live in a supposedly isolated spot. In no other place could I have had the privilege of knowing Niels Bohr, who is not only a great scientist but a great man. In no other way could I have seen develop a group feeling of responsibility for presenting the facts to the people and urging the only wise course—international control of atomic energy and bombs.<sup>87</sup>

Warner, who had reveled in delightful isolation in her New Mexico home along the banks of the Rio Grande now found the eyes of the world focused on the nearby little community of Los Alamos, which continued to grow as the scientists and their families ushered in the nuclear age.

In May, 1951, Vel Ludlow sent this letter to friends of Edith Warner:

On March 27<sup>th</sup> Edith left the hospital at Los Alamos to return to her home with a nurse to care for her. During the days which followed, she wrote this message to all of you:

‘After weeks in a hospital, it is especially wonderful to be here in Tilano’s room—which is the winter living room. Here he can rub my arm to relax me and

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<sup>86</sup> Warner, Christmas Greetings and a Report to my Friends, Folder 1, Edith Warner Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>87</sup> Warner, The Third Christmas Report to my Friends, 1945, Folder 1, Edith Warner Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

give me of his calm and strength. From the bed I can see the first light on the mountains, watch the snow clouds rise from the glistening Truchas peaks, follow the sunset color from the valley to the sky. I can almost hear the song of the river. It is a good place in which to wait for the passing from a rich full life into whatever work lies beyond. You, my many friends, have contributed so much to the fullness of my life through the years and in the past months have given of your thoughts, as well as more material assistance.

Whatever you may have felt here of peace and stillness came from the great Source of life and will be here always. I was but a channel, for which I am most grateful.

Since I cannot be well to take care of Tilano, I am happy and at peace. I would have you think of me that way.'

During those weeks she saw many friends and had opportunity to exchange thoughts and feelings often left unsaid. She felt it was a wonderful experience and that she had been unusually blessed.

On May 4<sup>th</sup> Edith passed into 'immortal summer.'<sup>88</sup>

Edith Warner's legacy reached many people during her lifetime and she touched many more for generations to follow. Her friends remembered her fondly. Peggy Pond Church honored Edith Warner through poetry and summarized what many other people felt:

*REQUIEM FOR EDITH*

*It is hard to say what you have been to us,  
as though while time foamed like a sea, while the floods rose around us,  
yours was the window that showed always the tranquil candle,  
the house by the side of the road, the tender welcome,  
the comfortable stove, good talker in winter,  
and you, the listening one whose silence healed us.  
When you have gone, where shall we turn for blessing?  
Who will speak to us of the beauty of mountain and mesa?  
Who will listen for us to the unspoken wisdom  
of morning and evening and the changing seasons?  
Oh you, whose roots were so deep in a time of uprooting,  
how can our restless spirits find rest? Live now within us  
like a spring of clear water. Be present in your garden  
like a gentle ghost. Let us often find you*

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<sup>88</sup> Church and Velma Ludlow, "L'envoi," and letter, May, 1951, in *The House at Otowi Bridge*, 147-148; Letter from Velma Ludlow to friends of Edith Warner, 1951, Folder 1, Anna K. Sherman Papers on Edith Warner, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

*there under the drowsy shadow of ancient apple  
where the green lettuce sprouts, and old Tilano  
kneels still to coax the water among the long rows  
of ripening berry. Tell us you have forgotten  
the long anguish of dying, that it was after all only the seed  
splitting from its hard shell, and against all of earth's weight,  
bursting at last into light and immortal summer.*<sup>89</sup>

In 1959, Peggy Pond Church published a book about her friend, *The House at Otowi Bridge: The Story of Edith Warner and Los Alamos*. In 1965, Frank Waters published a novel about Warner, *The Woman at Otowi Crossing: A Novel*. Warner continues to influence others as her words live on. In 2001, Patrick Burns published many of her writings in *In the Shadow of Los Alamos: Selected Writings of Edith Warner*. He borrowed the title from Warner's unfinished autobiography.

Edith Warner clearly experienced four aspects that philosopher and psychologist William James described as indicative of mystical states of consciousness. James observed that all mystical states are difficult to explain, yet they leave the recipient sensing that he or she has gained some form of knowledge. Most mystical states pass quickly and leave the subject feeling as though they had been grasped, held, or overpowered by some higher force or power.<sup>90</sup> The natural splendor that surrounded Warner profoundly moved her spiritually and she often displayed multiple characteristics of mystical experience simultaneously. "This is a day when life and the world seem to be

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<sup>89</sup> Church, "Requiem for Edith," in *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 148-149; Church, Requiem for Edith, Folder 1, Edith Warner Collection, Fray Angélico Chávez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A.

<sup>90</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1902, reprint (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 332-33.

standing still—only time and the river flowing past the mesas. I cannot work, I go out into the sunshine to sit receptively for what there is in this stillness and calm. I am keenly aware that there is something,” she wrote in her journal of detecting a power around her. “Just now it seemed to flow in a rhythm around me and then to enter me—something which comes in a hushed inflowing. All of me is still and yet alert, ready to become part of this wave that laps the shore on which I sit. Somehow I have no desire to name it or understand. It is enough that I should feel and be of it in moments such as this.”<sup>91</sup> These moments happened to Warner on their own accord; she could not force them. “As I worked,” Warner penned in her journal on another occasion, “there came without warning a flowing into me of that which I have come to associate with the gods. I went to the open door and looked up at the mountains with something akin to awe. It forced me out into the open where I could look up to those sacred high places on which humans do not dwell. Then it left me—perhaps to return to those sacred places.”<sup>92</sup> This experience, like the others, passed quickly but she carried these moments with her. At times she struggled to convey her experience into words. “No it is not what Ouspensky experienced when he was drawn by the waves into them, becoming all—mountain, sea, sky, ship. I am I and earth is earth—mesa, sky, wind, rushing river,” she clarified. “Each is an entity but the essence of the earth flows into me—perhaps of me into the earth. And to me it is more than a few seconds’ experience. Nor is it any longer strange but natural,

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<sup>91</sup> Warner, journal entry, March 2, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 162.

<sup>92</sup> Warner, journal entry, February, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 162.

not ecstatic but satisfying. The detail of life becomes the scaffolding.”<sup>93</sup> On another occasion, she wrote, “Today the sun shines here, but the clouds hang low on the Sangre peaks and beyond Shumo. Again I have touched the fringe of the unknown and been drawn to it, not by my seeking, which is the only real way.”<sup>94</sup> When these states passed, she felt relaxed, expansive, and free from worry.

A few years later, hordes of America’s youth came to the West also seeking physical, social, and spiritual freedom. Beginning in the late 1960s, thousands of America’s youth, disenchanted with the war being fought in Vietnam and civil rights battles, moved en-masse to Taos, New Mexico where they sought to reject civilization and attempted to rebuild a new world emulating pueblo culture and their relationship with the natural world. The hippies felt that through communal living and service to their fellows, they would show the world an alternative to a spiritually bankrupt capitalist society

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<sup>93</sup> Warner, journal entry, May 21, 1933, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 163.

<sup>94</sup> Warner, journal entry, February 14, 1935, in Warner and Burns, *In the Shadow of Los Alamos*, 169.

CHAPTER V

TAOS HIPPIES MODEL AN ALTERNATIVE:  
FREEDOM FOR ALL?

Iris Keltz, like many of America's youth during the late 1960s, was disenchanted with the "imperialistic" American government and sought an alternative to the type of society she grew up in. "For me, the idea of going to graduate school or getting a permanent job at a moment when the world was in transformation felt like shackles on the heels of possibility," she explained. "I was willing to embrace poverty if it meant building a new way of life. I was convinced we were to slay the dragon of American imperialism and greed." Keltz, like many other the hippies, saw greed as a spiritual illness. She was ready to embrace freedom despite the obstacles. She quit her job as a teacher in New York and headed to New Buffalo commune near Taos, New Mexico. When she began her westward journey, she joyfully sang out loud, "Cast Your Fate to the Wind."<sup>1</sup> She was ready to try something radically different on her quest for physical, social, and spiritual freedom.

The thousands of hippies who found their way to the communes throughout the Taos region expanded on their predecessors' ideas of freedom. The West, and Taos in particular, beckoned because of a distinctive landscape and rich multi-cultural history—

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Keltz, "Close Encounters with New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie: Tribal Tales from the Heart of a Cultural Revolution*, ed., Iris Keltz (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2000), 48.

Native American, Anglo, and Hispanic. Taos had long been a hotbed for those who challenged mainstream thought. The myth of the West as a place of rebirth and freedom was well in place by the 1960s. John Muir, Everett Ruess, Jack Kerouac, and others had helped spread that interpretation of the West. But more specifically, the Taos Artist's Society and Mabel Dodge Luhan had suggested that Taos, in particular, offered a haven for non-mainstream thought, spiritual renewal, and freedom; also, it modeled a real alternative for changing the direction of what hippies perceived as a spiritually bankrupt, greedy capitalist society. The hippies would enlarge that philosophy and put some of their ideas into action by emulating Pueblo culture as an alternative model for society at large.

The hippies came to Taos in search of physical, social, and spiritual freedom—for themselves and for America; they believed that Taos would be the epicenter of a new awakening. They also claimed that Taos was the best location to complete their search for authenticity.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, the members of the Taos communes sought liberation from mainstream society, and they often found liberation in the spiritual realm. But that was not all that they wanted. Soon, they enlarged their dreams of freedom to encompass all of America; they wanted to transform mainstream society. They were seekers of salvation, first for themselves; later for the rest of the country and, perhaps, even the world. Grand dreams indeed. One hippie prophesized, “The future of America is coming to Taos, which we feel should be viewed as the highest compliment to Taoseños, Indians, Spanish, and Anglos alike. . . . for this magnificent valley may well be the amphitheater

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<sup>2</sup> Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 217.



in which will be enacted the final stage of the future of America.”<sup>3</sup> Many seekers claimed that they were indeed “saved” in Taos from an existence devoid of meaning or purpose. The hippies believed they were spearheading a peaceful spiritual revolution that would prove a counterpoint to a violent society. They would not take up arms but they would show the world, by example, a better way of life; eventually, they assumed, society would evolve toward their communal ways.

While John Muir, Everett Ruess, and Jack Kerouac found freedom wandering in solitude in the West, particularly in the wilderness, the Taos Society of Artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Edith Warner put down roots, while learning about their Native American neighbors. The hippies took a further step: they sought freedom in the West by living communally and imitating Pueblo life. The stance taken by these non-conformists is significant because their ideas continue to attract thousands of people today, those who are disenchanted with the state of affairs within and beyond this country turn to these freedom seekers for inspiration. Recently, I visited Taos to interview several people for this chapter. My interaction with the contemporary visitors and residents of Taos confirmed that the hippie experiment was not dead. The countercultural ideas of the 1960s were still alive and well in 2012, ready for the next major outbreak of spiritual revolution. The Taos art scene, too, still abounds with work saturated with hippie mysticism.

Many authors have touched on the Taos communes. Historian Lois Rudnick traces the history of the Mabel Dodge Luhan house from its creation in 1918 into the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

present. Avoiding New Buffalo and other communes, she spotlighted Mabel Dodge Luhan's house, which rested near the city's center. Rudnick argues that the house served as a microcosm of those American and European radicals and visionaries who came to the region to heal the wounds inflicted by industrialization and modernity.<sup>4</sup> Since she concentrates on the house itself, her scope remains narrow. Sherry Smith dedicates a chapter to the back-to-the-land movement in her recent book, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*.<sup>5</sup> Smith explores the battle for Native American rights, however, rather than the spiritual aspects of the communes. In *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*, Timothy Miller presents a broad overview of communes throughout the nation, but he provides only a brief reference to the Taos communes.<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Agnew, in *Back from the Land*, also offers an overview of the commune movement, focusing mainly on hippie communes, but she spends surprisingly little time discussing the Taos area, despite the high concentration of communes in the region.<sup>7</sup> None of these works addresses the spiritual aspects of the movement or the communalists' quest for freedom. This chapter will broaden our understanding of the era because it reveals that the hippies who came to Taos sought a multilayered freedom for themselves and also for America. In Taos, they assured themselves, they would usher in an awakening.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Agnew, *Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004).

Since Mabel Dodge Luhan and numerous artists had descended on the region in the early twentieth century, the region had remained a major gathering place for radicals and visionaries.. “I think Taos is a place of revolution,” Robbie Gordon, one of the founding members of New Buffalo commune told me, “They think Taos is a place is for art galleries.” Gordon laughed at some of the Taos residents and visitors, “Which it also is but let’s not forget where the art galleries came from. They came from revolutionaries,” he concluded, “this is a place for revolutionaries.” Gordon viewed himself and those who had dropped out of society to settle in Taos as revolutionaries.<sup>8</sup> When I asked Taos resident Gail Russell if she became more or less radical over time, she responded with laughter, stating, “I think really anyone who moves to Taos is really not moving towards the mainstream . . . we’re usually here because we want to get away from the mainstream.”<sup>9</sup> Russell never regretted her decision to move to Taos from Connecticut in the 1970s.

The romantic mystique that surrounds Taos, its landscape, and the nearby Pueblo culture drew waves of hippies to northern New Mexico some five decades after the first Eastern radicals arrived. Beginning in the late 1960s, newly arrived hippies began to form New Buffalo and other communes. Like their predecessors, they saw Indian culture

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<sup>8</sup> Robbie Gordon, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 28 November 2012, transcription p. 14, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>9</sup> Gail Russell, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 2 December 2012, transcription p. 5, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

as an alternative; they grew corn, squash, and beans, and borrowed traditions and customs from the Tiwa people of Taos.<sup>10</sup>

This new generation of young Americans, who came of age in the decade following the Korean War and 1950s conformity, yearned for freedom, peace, sharing, creativity, and authenticity. That yearning emerged for many reasons. The expansion of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War under Lyndon Johnson served as a catalyst for the movement. The youth of America who watched as their friends and brothers were sent off to die in the jungles of southeast Asia began to reject their own government. Many youth had taken part in the Civil Rights Movement. They fought for equality for a range of minority groups which had been oppressed. The movement faced great resistance and progress was achieved slowly. In Taos, they hoped to create an alternative to this bleak reality. America's youth had become disenchanted with society's hypocrisy; they wanted to live by the religious and spiritual principles that had long been preached to them. They shunned the greediness associated with mainstream society and felt that wealth should be shared more equally.<sup>11</sup> By the 1960s, the notion that American Indians represented simplicity and authenticity was firmly entrenched in American consciousness. The artists and writers discussed throughout this dissertation had successfully spread those notions. It makes perfect sense, then, that following the 1950s age of conformity, the youth of the 1960s and 1970s would turn to Taos and its indigenous inhabitants as a model of the authentic. Many activists became disillusioned

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<sup>10</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Sanders, "Introduction," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 13-15.

by their failure change the political system in the United States and turned toward spirituality and religion for comfort.<sup>12</sup> One comunard reminisced about, “‘innocent people getting clubbed. Then we began to understand that all those protests just weren’t going to do anything except breed hate.’ Another added, ‘I had done the political trip for awhile, but I got the point where I couldn’t just advocate social change, I had to live it.’”<sup>13</sup> Communes appeared to offer hippies the opportunity to live the ideals they had failed to create in the protest movement.

Just as Luhan, John Collier, and others had found inspiration in Taos Pueblo, so too were the hippies drawn to these New Mexico Native people. One such anonymous hippie declared, “It was my dream to belong to a tribe, where the energies flow among everyone, where people care for one another, where no one has to work, but everyone wants to do something because we’re all mutually dependent for our survival and happiness.”<sup>14</sup> Hippies had bought into the stereotyped impression of American Indians, which concluded erroneously that Indians were free because they did not have to work. This skewed concept of Indian freedom may have attracted these migrants to New Buffalo. Further, it may also have led to the commune’s demise. The communitarian movement was an attempt at healing or avoiding the spiritual disease of greed. Another member of the commune movement said many of his generation felt a deep spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen A. Kent, *From Slogans to Mantras: Social Protest and Religious Conversion in the Late Vietnam War Era* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), xi-5.

<sup>13</sup> Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 270.

<sup>14</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 217-18.

dissatisfaction. He came to realize that something was wrong with his life. His former friends, wrote one of his fellow commune residents, “seemed to be following a meaningless existence, content with frivolity and mediocrity, consumed by a nervous tension which he no longer found bearable.”<sup>15</sup> They sought liberation.

The hippies often found inspiration in the Beats. Jack Kerouac had prophesized in the late 1950s, “I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to a mountain to pray.”<sup>16</sup> A decade later, Iris Keltz attended a Rainbow Gathering with thousands of other counterculturalists from around the country. Together, they climbed a mountain in the Grand Tetons to pray. It was, she wrote:

a moment of epiphany for me—I was always on the hunt for a mythological explanation of the world. We were reverting to an old form—tribalism—but in a very new way. We would not be a tribe because of lineage, race, language or tradition. We were a rainbow of people becoming a tribe because we had a collective belief in an alternative to materialism, greed, military power and an unpopular war fought using our brothers, schoolmates and boyfriends. I understood that when we climbed that mountaintop in the Grand Tetons, we were praying for a miracle to change our world. We still are.<sup>17</sup>

Like Keltz, hippies began to fulfill Kerouac’s vision, first through small numbers of wanderers who searched for some kind of transcendence. By the late 1960s, thousands of seekers were roaming and searching, and many of them stopped by the communes nestled in the mountains of Taos. Some remained for a day, some, for a week or a year, others, for a lifetime. The hippies followed in the footsteps of their Beat predecessors. Echoing

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<sup>15</sup> Agnew, *Back from the Land*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking press, 1958), 77-78.

<sup>17</sup> Iris Keltz, “Preface,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 23.

the Wobblies' "Workers of the World Unite," former commune resident Edward Sanders observed that the northern New Mexico "commune-ists" advised: "Workers of the World Relax."<sup>18</sup>

The 1960s and early 1970s proved a time of change and experimentation, and many hippies delved deeply into dimensions of religion and spirituality after experimenting with psychedelic drugs. Drug use was widespread among these rebels. The most common drugs were marijuana, hashish, and LSD, but frequently they turned to mescaline, peyote, mushrooms, DMT, uppers, and downers.<sup>19</sup> A high percentage of the counterculturalists felt that spirituality was an important dimension of their lives. Many hippies began exploring the more obscure or mysterious ancient religions, such as Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native American religions.<sup>20</sup> Historian Timothy Miller describes the spiritual beliefs held by many of the hippies as "a sort of vague introspection, often a kind of nature mysticism and often held to be beyond description in words." Some claimed to find freedom through chemical transcendence and turned to the American West to continue that trip or to take that journey to the next stage. "A great many of those who took LSD and its analogues," Miller explains, "felt that their psychedelic experiences were spiritual in nature, and that opening set many off on

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<sup>18</sup> Sanders, "Introduction," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>20</sup> These religions were more "obscure and mysterious" in the United States during the 1960s than they are today. Some would argue that a lack of familiarity with non-Western religions still exists in this country. Miller noted that an influx of teachers from Asia during this time made these religions more accessible than previously. In a scene from *Easy Rider* at New Buffalo, for example, some members discuss the meaning of a reading from the *I-Ching*, an ancient Chinese divination tool.

extended spiritual quests.” Indeed, he asks, “If the psychedelic sacrament, which helped one to strip away external crap and get to the essence of what the universe was all about, pointed toward spiritual experience, who could not take that road?”<sup>21</sup> Timothy Leary had advised a generation to “turn on, tune in and drop out,” and many of those who lived in the communes followed his teachings. Drug use and the quest for spirituality became intertwined. Keltz explained, “The way to peace was through inner peace and the way to societal change was to change oneself. . . . We were the critical mass that could change the direction of our capitalistic society.”<sup>22</sup> Often these seekers found in religion and spirituality the elements that drew them to drugs and communes in the first place.

By the late 1960s, communes had sprouted in almost every state, and although exact numbers are impossible to obtain, the West, and Taos in particular, certainly had a high concentration of these group homes.<sup>23</sup> The Taos region alone supported between nine and fifteen communes, including New Buffalo, the Hog Farm, Lama, Reality Construction Company, and Morningstar.<sup>24</sup> By 1969, hippies were leaving their communes in other states, en-masse, to settle in New Mexico.<sup>25</sup> Taos became a magnet for the commune movement because of its dramatic landscape, rich cultural heritage, and reputation as a center for non-conformist ideas. A remote, sparsely populated mountain

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<sup>21</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Keltz, “Preface,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, xviii.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, “Introduction,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 16-17.

<sup>25</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 217-18.



town located at an altitude of 7,000 feet, Taos boasted a long history of ethnic groups: Tewa people, Hispanics, Anglos, and an assortment of others, including, for example, some Irish people. The Pueblo people, their relationship to the land, and the landscape itself held spiritual significance for the communards, as it once had for Mabel Dodge Luhan and the Taos Society of Artists. The commune residents felt strongly that they were in “God’s country.” Edward Sanders, a former resident of a Taos commune explained, “There was a kind of spiritual topography to the placing of roots in God’s country, and somehow the curves of the brain flowed out and fit in with its contours, escarpments, shapes, smells, seasons, flora and fauna, drainage and heritage.”<sup>26</sup> Writing in the underground hippie newspaper, the *Fountain of Light*, one hippie summed up why he and his friends had chosen Taos “Some of us came to Taos because it is a real place, with real and meaningful history and traditions, isolated in a sense and abounding in nature. It is a ruggedly beautiful place that offers us a chance to reacquaint ourselves with the Planet Earth.”<sup>27</sup> His use of the capital “P” and “E” for “Planet Earth” is reminiscent of the practice of Edith Warner, Mabel Dodge Luhan, John Muir, Everett Ruess, and the nineteenth century transcendentalists, all of whom had capitalized words synonymous with nature, equating them with God.

The stunning natural setting and the unique blend of cultures in the American Southwest drew many of these counterculturalists to Taos and northern New Mexico.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sanders, “Introduction,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> “Why Taos,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, xiv.

The land offered the promise of spiritual renewal and served as a muse for many of these radicals.<sup>29</sup> “How can you just walk out the door and feel horrible here,” Gail Russel asked me, laughing, “it’s just such a stunning place, just look at the sunset or the sunrise everyday . . . how can you feel negative, or bad?”<sup>30</sup> A poet named Bill Pearlman who lived in one of the Taos area communes viewed the area as a beautiful open space “mostly untrammelled by modernity.” Like John Muir, who was attracted to the Sierra Nevadas, Pearlman was drawn to the luminosity of Taos. “The communes,” he wrote, “were often built in mountainous areas close to the sun, not unlike ancient cities where inaccessibility and the brilliant light marked a place where the soul could find an earthly paradise. The light in New Mexico has meant a great deal to me. . . . There was and is a sense of splendor and energy in the New Mexico landscape. There was a heart and mystery there.”<sup>31</sup> Frequently, other communards, like Pearlman, spoke of the power of the New Mexican landscape.

The Taos area was like a magnet for America’s youth who were seeking alternatives to mainstream society during the 1960s and 1970s. In a similar fashion, Mabel Dodge Luhan, writing in 1947, had pondered whether or not Taos could have been named after the followers of the Tao, or Tao-Te-Ching, an ancient Chinese philosophy or religion. She found many similarities between the Taoist and Taos Pueblo religions,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>30</sup> Gail Russell, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 2 December 2012, transcription p. 6, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>31</sup> Agnew, *Back from the Land*, 88.

especially the non-violent behavior found in both cultures.<sup>32</sup> Like Luhan, scores of Anglo youth in the 1960s viewed Taos as a center of spiritual energy. Many outsiders who came to Taos found spiritual freedom, and historian Lois Rudnick even referred to these people as “prophets.”<sup>33</sup> The hippies, like their predecessors, were on a quest for spiritual and psychic renewal.<sup>34</sup>

The hippies, too, chose the interior West because they wanted to live as far from industrial America as possible. For many hippies, civilization was the antitheses of freedom. By 1969, hippies left communes in California, New York, and Vermont and converged on New Mexico to experience “voluntary primitivism.”<sup>35</sup> In sparsely inhabited New Mexico, rebels with creative imaginations found themselves questioning how Americans live, work, and relate with each other and with the environment.<sup>36</sup> These hippies found in the West new ways of perceiving society and its possible future, and the new civilization they envisioned began with the communes.

The Native American Church (NAC) helped many of the Taos hippies through the transition from an oftentimes destructive lifestyle of heavy drug and alcohol use towards

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<sup>32</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 217-18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., xiii-xiv; according to the United States Census Bureau, the population of New Mexico in 1970 was 1,016,000 and the population of Taos County was 17,516. *New Mexico Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*, compiled and edited by Richard L. Forstall, Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nm190090.txt> (accessed 13 March, 2013).

an existence rooted in spiritual values. The NAC uses peyote as a sacrament, and yet most members also regard themselves as Christians, accept the Christian set of ethics, and the Christian Trinity.<sup>37</sup> Although the Native American Church of the United States was first chartered in 1950, peyote has been used by North American indigenous groups for as long as ten thousand years.<sup>38</sup> Indigenous groups used peyote for religious purposes throughout most of northern Mexico and southern Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico during the years prior to contact.<sup>39</sup> The Kiowa and other Southern Plains people of Indian Territory and adjacent regions had adopted peyote religious ceremonies by the late 1800s. Tribes who had once lived farther south shared rituals with their new neighbors.<sup>40</sup> Indians who had already converted to Christianity saw peyotism as an Indian form of Christianity.<sup>41</sup> By 1914, peyotism had spread to the pueblo of Taos, although it was first documented there in 1720.<sup>42</sup> Christianity played an increasing role in peyotism as the Native American church expanded in the early twentieth century. The NAC was chartered in New Mexico in 1945.<sup>43</sup> By the late 1960s, the NAC had become well

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<sup>37</sup> J.S. Slotkin, *The Peyote Religion: A study in Indian-White Relations* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 68.

<sup>38</sup> Omer Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 17, 240.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 148, 202.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

established within the Taos pueblo, and a few tribal elders instructed the hippies, allowing them to participate in their ceremonies.

Native American Church meetings helped the communards understand their experiences with LSD, psychedelic mushrooms, and other drugs. The NAC also helped create a spiritual foundation that enabled the hippies to comprehend the experiences they had shared but could not adequately explain or put into words.<sup>44</sup> Many of the Taos hippies eventually came to view peyote as a sacrament rather than a drug and became faithful adherents. “God made the Peyote cactus,” anthropologist J.S. Slotkin once explained, “and put some of his power into it, in order to help the Indians. Therefore when one eats Peyote he absorbs the power inherent in it, which he can then utilize. Thus it is a sacrament like the bread and wine of White Christians, which are consumed in order to absorb the Holy Spirit inherent in them.”<sup>45</sup> The NAC shares the same basic characteristics found in all the major world religions, including a doctrine, a set of moral or ethical values—called the “Peyote Road”—and ritual.<sup>46</sup> The ethical code has four main components: brotherly love, care of family, self-reliance, and avoidance of alcohol.<sup>47</sup> Both visions and revelations were common among the NAC followers. Visions brought power to individuals, whereas revelations offered help for the community. The concept of visions is also prevalent in Christianity: both the Old and

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<sup>44</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 226.

<sup>45</sup> Slotkin, *The Peyote Religion*, 70.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

New Testaments of the Bible discuss visions.<sup>48</sup> Many hippies had used LSD and other drugs, which produced similar visionary states, making for an easy transition into the Native American Church.

Founding member of New Buffalo, Robbie Gordon, spoke with me about some of his experiences. “My attitudes towards psychedelics changed when I hit the Peyote Church because I knew about acid and I’d taken it a quite number of times and some other things too. . . . but being in that circle, in that prayer way, and feeling part of a tradition, more than that it was the physical presence in that teepee,” he reminisced. “The songs, the drums, a feeling there was a spirit moving in there, sweat lodges too. Anyway, starting right then I put Peyote in a different category from all of the other psychedelics, even though I knew the chemistry and all that, but man this sacred stuff started to really mean something to me. I’d had a feeling for Christianity, I mean I was not an angry atheist, I was far from it,” Gordon explained. “I was just sort of an agnostic but the Peyote Way was what really inspired me and so did what we were doing in Buffalo. It seemed to me to fit hand and glove with you know when you go into a teepee and you recreate the world as it is. That . . . there’s work to do. You do it in a circle and then you come out of the teepee and you do that, there is work to do,” he said. “You do a circle, you got to keep together with the people and it’s a very good model for communal living a prayer meeting like that. I still feel that even though I’ve only been to one peyote

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 75.

meeting in the last fifteen years. Even so it's highly sacred to me and so are all the ways of the native people . . . which is just exactly what is needed if you ask me.”<sup>49</sup>

New Buffalo was one of the best known Taos area communes, mainly because of its appearance in Dennis Hopper's movie *Easy Rider*, and it became a model for many other communes. Joyce Robinson, one of the founders of New Buffalo, recalls moving to New Mexico in 1966 with Max Finstein—often credited with founding the commune—simply to live with her friends. Max had been writing poetry, getting high, hanging out with friends, and working some. “If you had to label Max,” she wrote, “he was a beat. But he really wasn't that either. He was always his own man.” Robinson had an epiphany while attending a wedding ceremony that drew on the traditions of the Native American Church. “I took a lot of acid that night and it triggered something inside of me,” she wrote. “I thought to myself, I love a lot of people so why don't we all live together.”<sup>50</sup> Soon, Max's friend, a young poet named Rick Klein, offered to buy a place to start a commune, and it seemed like destiny. They wanted to put their ideas and freedom philosophy into action. Robinson never missed city life or the culture she left behind. She recalled, “We had an ideal, a belief that people could live together in peace.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Robbie Gordon, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 28 November 2012, transcription p. 7, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>50</sup> Joyce Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 39.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

They modeled New Buffalo on their idea of an Indian community, the antithesis of capitalist society; and the proximity of the Taos Pueblo provided an easily-accessible model for their community. They had a peyote meeting to bless and sanctify their arrival on the land and lived in tipis at the beginning. They planned to live off the land, which would provide sustenance. And they chose “New Buffalo” as the name because the Plains Indians had sustained themselves with buffalo. They built a kiva-like circle sunk into the floor of the common room, to emulate pueblo life, and they planted corn and beans and learned ritual celebrations from the Taos Indians. In a sense, they viewed themselves as a lost tribe that needed to relearn how to live, dance, sing, raise children, grow food, and die.<sup>52</sup>

The founding of New Buffalo sparked a great hippie migration to Taos. “People from all over the country were tired of the old order and longed for something else,” observed Robinson. “We happened to be some of the first people to manifest the idea.”<sup>53</sup> Arthur Kopecky, a former member of New Buffalo, recently published the journals that he wrote during his years at the commune. His first impressions of New Buffalo felt like coming home:

Here is a small palace of adobe and great beams, a desert courtyard, and a family of freaks just like us. There were about 20 for dinner last night. This place is really functioning. There are two horses, chickens, turkeys, a metalshop, some machinery, many things that need to be done and the most fantastic housing . . . this is my idea of a together place . . . The pull of magic is great. Here we are,

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<sup>52</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 222.

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43.



after only three days, in the Southwest. I'm amazed and . . . enchanted more than I can say. Our path is surely good.<sup>54</sup>

Iris Keltz had a similar reaction to New Buffalo. "New Mexico was sort of the opening, it's like my Sipapu, it's where I emerged on the earth," she told me, "because having been born in New York, it's a concrete world, so New Mexico is my place, where I got connected to the earth."<sup>55</sup> They each knew almost immediately that New Buffalo was to become their home.

Freedom was vital for those at New Buffalo. On Independence Day, Kopecky paradoxically paid tribute to the country whose values he rejected and acknowledged that many men had fought for his right to explore freedom in this way. "Today is our country's birthday!" he wrote. "Many have struggled so that today we can be this free, and we thank them."<sup>56</sup> His quest for freedom stood in dark relief against the stifling place America had become. He mused:

America, America. Once the home of the free Indians, now the home of so many property owners, land of the dollar and the machine--our home too. We roam it--free spirits of a different life--refugees like the Indians before us, looking for a place of peace. Unmolested we travel on the asphalt ribbons that are so many. For us in America there is freedom and peace, and through this land, on the vibration of peace and freedom, we travel. Something else, indeed, to be born of a new spirit and a part of it all.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Arthur Kopecky, *New Buffalo: Journals from a Taos Commune* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Iris Keltz, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 6 November 2012, transcription p. 5, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>56</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Here, Kopecky draws further comparisons between the hippie culture and the Indian people. He also admits once more that the country he rejected helped give him the ability to discover these levels of freedom.

Those at New Buffalo explored other types of social freedom, including nudism and sexual promiscuity. Iris Keltz, upon her arrival at the commune, was intrigued as she wandered into the kitchen to find topless women preparing vegetables that had just been taken from the ground.<sup>58</sup> Clothes were too restraining. Some women (and men) attempted to free themselves from traditional gender roles by avoiding both clothing and traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationships. Ultimately, though, hippie women's focus remained on homemaking just as it had for Edith Warner, and Mabel Dodge Luhan. Men pushed the limits of their gender roles by growing their hair long and, arguably, by focusing on homemaking, themselves. The expression "free love" was often used during this time, and, according to Joyce Robinson, meant that people could sleep with whomever they wanted to. "People not living communally thought we were terrible and immoral," she observed, "but they also thought, I'd like to do something like that but I'm not free enough. Being part of the group that believed in free love, I found out that this practice created hurt. There was always someone being left behind. When there were families, it was more complicated and hurtful."<sup>59</sup> Most of the people I interviewed

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<sup>58</sup> Iris Keltz, "First Encounters with New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, "Founding Settler of New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43.

explained that free love hurt many people and split up many families. The hippies learned, through experience, that freedom needed limits.

Although the members of New Buffalo sought social freedom they often disagreed with each other. For example, one evening around forty members had a discussion about food stamps over dinner. “Paul thinks they suck. I, myself, think they help; a little connection with the government is ok,” Kopecky wrote of the debate. “In my view, the commune is part of the society. It is a revolutionary base, but not in a revolution that will violently overthrow the existing.”<sup>60</sup> Hippies faced the paradox of rejecting American society, while still relying on money and governmental aid. Certainly, most felt themselves to be revolutionaries who would peacefully overthrow the existing capitalist system. Kopecky was grateful to have the opportunity to be part of this revolution. He held on to these ideas and beliefs throughout his time at New Buffalo. In fact, he kept his journal to document the commune in hopes of one day spreading his ideas.

From its inception, spirituality and spiritual freedom were significant to many at New Buffalo. Historian Lois Rudnick notes that Rick Klein, one of the founders of New Buffalo, was planning on a career as a professor of English, but was “converted” by LSD, like many of the countercultural seekers.<sup>61</sup> From the beginning, Kopecky was most interested in those following an explicitly spiritual path. In his journal description of two of the first members he met, he emphasized spiritual qualities:

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<sup>60</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 222.

Larry McInteer . . . quiet and young with long blond hair . . . Usually just barefoot, he often leads prayer. A peyote church follower, he knows the ways of the land . . . Larry is a very communal person.

Naomi is a beautiful, graceful brown-skinned lady. A spirit of quiet, yoga, and peace, she . . . keeps a simple, clean, temple of a room.<sup>62</sup>

Regular prayer was common at New Buffalo; they often held peyote ceremonies and said simple prayers of gratitude for the food they received from the land.<sup>63</sup> The ringing of a loud gong alerted people that it was dinnertime, and before dining the inhabitants and visitors held hands in an outdoor prayer circle to bless the food.<sup>64</sup> “The sunset played a symphony of colors. Rose became blood red, mauve, and lavender streaked with gold,” Iris Keltz wrote, enthralled with the blessing said before meals. “The farmers, party people, transients, mothers, children, philosophers, workers, and poets held hands to share moments of awe and thanksgiving.”<sup>65</sup>

The proximity of the Pueblo of Taos proved vital as the spiritual lifeline of New Buffalo. Iris Keltz told me, “it’s definitely like, it’s like the heart of that place. . . . the Taos pueblo is like the hearth or the heart, it’s always important.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, when I asked Robbie Gordon how important the nearness of the Pueblo was, he responded

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<sup>62</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 222.

<sup>64</sup> Keltz, “First Encounters with New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 34.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Iris Keltz, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 6 November 2012, transcription p. 6, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

without hesitation, “Yeah, that’s essential.”<sup>67</sup> Many residents experimented with peyote. “Peyote or mescaline was,” Keltz told me, “I remember holding out my hands on the mesa top of New Buffalo actually and looking at my hand and the earth and going ‘the same, it’s the same thing’ just the earth, just feeling so connected. I am of this earth, we are the same.”<sup>68</sup> The Pueblo of Taos in particular, offered the ideal location for hippies to explore an alternative spirituality compatible with their ideals; the residents at New Buffalo who became involved with the Native American Church offered reverence to the ancient tradition. Like Robbie Gordon, others eventually came to view Peyote as a sacrament rather than a drug. The Taos hippies considered themselves fortunate to have Taos Pueblo elders such as little Joe Gomez as their spiritual guides, and many made positive changes in their lives. Gail Russell spoke to me about Little Joe Gomez, “he was really considered a saint,” she said, reiterating, “he was really considered a saint in the Taos Pueblo.”<sup>69</sup> Arthur Kopecky and others gave up tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana to follow the spiritual path.<sup>70</sup> “The huge teepee is up and the floor covered with sheepskins, blankets, and rugs. Tonight we go in to pray for a good spring and for this place,”

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<sup>67</sup> Robbie Gordon, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 28 November 2012, transcription p. 16, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>68</sup> Iris Keltz, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 6 November 2012, transcription p. 7, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>69</sup> Gail Russell, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 2 December 2012, transcription p. 7, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>70</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 86, 162.

Kopecky wrote of a meeting that took place at the commune. “New Buffalo was started with a peyote meeting,” he wrote, “The ceremony joins the spirit of the new arrivals and the Indians, and gives thanks to mother earth, father sky, and Jesus, for our life.”<sup>71</sup>

Iris Keltz also found meaning and direction in the Native American Church. She recalled first hearing about the NAC from her friend Moe. “Taking out a handmade cedar box,” Keltz recalled, “she showed me her sacred hawk and eagle feathers. In hushed tones she intimated the great power and mystery of the Peyote Church.”<sup>72</sup> Keltz was intrigued, noting that the Peyote Church helped some of her friends feel connected spiritually, and soon she had the opportunity to experience the NAC firsthand.<sup>73</sup>

The doorway to the ceremonial tipi faced the east, and the people moved into the tipi from east to west in correspondence with the celestial cycles. Keltz was afraid but she entered with reverence. She remembered her friend telling her earlier of the power and mystery of the peyote church. There was an altar beside the fire which held a large peyote button.<sup>74</sup> “A gourd rattle, a water drum and little Joe’s singing started the nightlong ceremony. The sounds merged like the wind, rain and lightning during a storm and became the heartbeat of the world,” she recalled, adding, “Little Joe’s attempt to teach transplanted dropouts of an urban materialistic society to pray and to revere the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>72</sup> Keltz, “Close Encounters with New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 48-49.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>74</sup> Iris Keltz, “The Peyote Church,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 105.

natural world was nothing less than noble.”<sup>75</sup> Her image of the earth having a heartbeat is reminiscent of John Muir’s personification of nature. She was instructed to chew the sacred, bitter peyote buttons slowly. “During the night, Justin blessed me at the adobe altar, flapping black eagle feathers around my body and gathering smoke from the dried cedar needles sprinkled on the coal bed,” she recalled, mentioning that each person participated in the ceremony. “The drum and rattle passed around the circle, each singer’s song a unique prayer to the universe.”<sup>76</sup> A woman named Rubria began singing with the exuberance of Janis Joplin, one of the few to sing in English rather than in Tewa:

*Meet me, Jesus, meet me,  
Meet me in the middle of the air.  
And if these wings should fail me,  
Meet me with another pair.*<sup>77</sup>

Jesus is central in many Native American Church meetings.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps ironically, many hippies, despite their rejection of mainstream society, in the end, returned partially to Christianity, the mainstream religion of America.

The enchanting evening came to an end but Keltz would always remember her first experience at an NAC Meeting. “A shaft of sunlight came through the smoke hole

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Christian churches, however, sought to suppress the use of peyote, particularly from 1870-1930. In response to this attack and to gain support for their religion throughout the United States, many Native American Church groups added elements of Christianity to their services. Today, NAC meetings retain varying amounts of Christian traits. Thomas Constantine Maroukis, *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 9, 119.

with a silent thud. The colors lost their intensity and people looked more human, less mythic. The Earth Mother and others who had been sitting up all night brought breakfast into the tipi,” she recalled. “They served food from the three kingdoms--roasted blue cornmeal, fruit and cooked meat. After the closing song, peyote fans and gourd rattles were carefully placed in their cedar boxes.”<sup>79</sup> The reverence displayed by the others moved her. She was to be forever changed and had unusual feelings stirring within her. “Out the tipi door and into the rising sun we went, greeted by snow-capped mountains, unbroken blue skies, cedar-and-sage scented air. It was like being present at the dawn of creation.”<sup>80</sup> Participants often spoke of feeling reborn following their first peyote meeting.<sup>81</sup>

That spiritual connection ran even deeper with some hippies. Robbie Gordon began attending sweat lodges and aspects of various forms of Native American spirituality shape his life to this day.<sup>82</sup> “I can put their whole religions into a phrase—all my relatives,” he told me. “What you say when you go into a sweat lodge,” he explained,

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<sup>79</sup> Keltz, “The Peyote Church,” 108.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> The depth of the Pueblo of Taos’ involvement with the Native American Church was unusual among the pueblos. Many members of the Pueblo of Taos chose not to participate in the NAC. Each person I interviewed for this chapter mentioned the difference between the Peyote Church and Kiva ceremonies for the Pueblo of Taos. The elders readily shared the NAC with the hippies because it arrived at the pueblo recently and was not steeped in tradition for the Pueblo Indians. The Kiva ceremonies, however, were kept secret from the newcomers to the region.

<sup>82</sup> These traditions are a conglomerate of different individual tribal or regional practices. A virtually generic set of Native American spiritual practices has emerged over the last century.



“it just means that you recognize that everything I’m looking at is related and everything I’m looking is my relative, and so we’re all family. That’s makes us all equal. Me, and the elk, and the worms, and the sagebrush, are all equal.” These principles have guided his life for decades, he explained.<sup>83</sup>

Many at New Buffalo felt that the communal experience itself was highly spiritual and heralded a new epoch in human history. “This is the start of a spiritual age,” Kopecky wrote, observing that “The most obvious spiritual connection; we work more to serve each other and find a new path, than to accumulate personal wealth [sic].”<sup>84</sup> He felt that living communally gave him the opportunity to serve his fellow humans. “World peace, brotherhood, service to your fellows, respect for teachers, love for God, group consciousness: these things I am for, and they are found in many ways.”<sup>85</sup> He felt that the simplicity of communal life could help raise the consciousness of mankind as it did for himself and his friends. He and many other Taos communards felt that their purpose was to slowly improve our society by offering themselves as an example of a peaceful alternative to mainstream capitalist culture.

Max Finstein, founder of New Buffalo, later established a commune called Reality Construction Company for very different reasons. New Buffalo had suffused life with spiritual meaning. Finstein and others left New Buffalo because they wanted to free

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<sup>83</sup> Robbie Gordon, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 28 November 2012, transcription p. 8, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>84</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 171.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

themselves from what they viewed as the rampant spirituality of the place. He started Reality Construction Company because he was certain that a “fascist police-state” would soon take control of the United States government and destroy all the revolutionary counterculturalists. His was a militant group who planned to resist the government from this communal stronghold.<sup>86</sup> They would defend their freedom. They chose the name Reality Construction Company, in all likelihood, because they were creating an alternative to mainstream society, they were “constructing” a new “reality.”

Despite the differences, Reality had some things in common with New Buffalo. Reality, too, constructed adobe living quarters and lived primitively without electricity or running water.<sup>87</sup> The members of Reality were also involved with the NAC, although it is not known how many followed the “Peyote Road.” They did, at the very least, construct one of their communal buildings in the form of a Native American peyote bird.<sup>88</sup> They also believed, like the members of New Buffalo, that they were modeling an alternative to the capitalist system. “The time has come to adopt a way of life that will give meaning to the sojourn on earth,” a Reality member named Jasper Blowsnake wrote in the Taos hippie newspaper, the *Fountain of Light*. “We are striving to be self-sufficient. We are eating less and only what is available and/or grown here,” he explained. “It is necessary at this point in history to be concerned with the common good of the people. All thought about self must be expelled in order that one may become

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<sup>86</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 225.

<sup>87</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 79.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 232.

individually responsible for the whole—the whole of humanity. The establishment of cooperative groups is necessary for the production of food stuffs and the perpetuation of the biological process—life on the planet. . . . This is one way of curing the illness of this earth.”<sup>89</sup> They, too, thought communalism could free society from its destructive course.

Despite the similarities between New Buffalo and Reality, the differences in ideology were overwhelming. “The prerequisite for selflessness is to begin the establishment of such cooperative groups,” Blowsnake explained but then emphasized, “to begin—not to join an established order, not to step in another’s gain. The whole damned world is overpopulated. Find for yourself that which will bring joy to others. Don’t expect it to be handed to you.” He added that when they formed Reality Construction Company “We intended not to be interfered with by irresponsible people. You’ve got to do it yourself. This is an enormous continent with lots of available land. Northern New Mexico is an arid dry terrain. The wood is sparse. The people are poor and are being invaded. . . . Don’t come.”<sup>90</sup> Although they sought to help the planet by modeling an alternative to capitalism, they did not profess brotherly love and were much less welcoming of outsiders than New Buffalo. Reality Construction Company was more disciplined and organized than New Buffalo: Reality accepted few new members, remained at a fairly constant size of twenty-five residents, and evicted unwanted troublemakers.<sup>91</sup> “There has been here at Reality an establishment of regulatory factors

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<sup>89</sup> Jasper Blowsnake, “Reality Construction Co,” in *Fountain of Light* #12 (Arroyo Seco, N.M.: Rainbow Publications, 1970), 19.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 80.

such as—setting and maintaining a stable population of individuals—meetings of 40 and 50 people around a table to seat 25 comfortably to decide who will leave [sic]—very unnatural—but necessary,” Blowsnake explained. “The land here has told us it cannot feed more people.”<sup>92</sup>

Reality also had a different philosophy concerning visitors. “What more do we need to offer a visiting brother but a good day’s work, three good meals, and a good nights sleep and that’s all! This is a way of life, not a scenic wonderland,” Blowsnake proclaimed. “We do not play any games of friendliness, unity, one humanity, cosmic cowboy bullshit—we all know that!” Perhaps he is referring to the ideology of New Buffalo, the former commune of several Reality members. Reality gained an austere reputation. “We inform our brothers of the possibilities available to them elsewhere and encourage them to move on.” The members of Reality had an apocalyptic belief about the future. “The possibilities of global famine are imminent—soon there will be many more cooperative farming groups all over America,” Blowsnake claimed. “Buy land in every state and with vigilance put into cooperation this dream. But above all remember . . . ‘Don’t come to New Mexico and if you are already here with nothing to do—LEAVE!’”<sup>93</sup>

Reality communards were convinced that weapons would help them attain the freedom they desired. Men with rifles met visitors at the gate and turned most of them

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<sup>92</sup> Blowsnake, “Reality Construction Co,” in *Fountain of Light* #12, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

away.<sup>94</sup> Bill Gersh, a former Reality resident, explained that they spent an enormous amount of time keeping peaceful hippies away. He acknowledges the paradoxes of the commune. “We were going to supply the world with food, but meanwhile, we never really grew any,” he explained. They were “going out [to] change the attitude of such and such people, and if they don’t pay attention to us, we are going to, you know, blow them away.”<sup>95</sup> This save-the-world freedom philosophy could be taken to extremes. A neighboring commune, Morningstar, agreed to farm communally with Reality Construction Company, sharing the harvest. One day, some rather laid back Morningstar members decided to pick some corn from the joint crop. Reality communards claimed that those at Morningstar had not done their fair share of the planting and fired warning shots with their rifles over the heads of the “offenders.”<sup>96</sup> On another occasion, Hugh Gardner, a nomadic scholar who visited numerous communes, left Reality in a panicked state, according to historian Timothy Miller, “after a night spent in a sweat-filled sleeping bag while one of several psychopathic personalities in residence at the time walked around in the dark randomly shooting a rifle at targets unknown, some not very far from his head.”<sup>97</sup>

The increased discipline and organization did not help Reality achieve greater material success than the other communes, but that was not the goal; members were

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<sup>94</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 80.

<sup>95</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 225.

<sup>96</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 79.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

preparing themselves for a violent revolution. But their goals proved elusive. Reality Construction Company was short-lived; it survived for only three years, from 1969-1972.<sup>98</sup> Michael Duncan, the owner of the property and a commune supporter, soon became frustrated with the problems at Reality and kicked the members off his land.<sup>99</sup> Reality Construction Company's approach to freedom stood in stark contrast to that of New Buffalo and indeed to all of the other communes in the region, which were generally more spiritually based and open-minded.

Further communes in the Taos area expected their members to experience physical, spiritual, and social freedom. These included Lama, Morningstar, Lorien, Pilar Hill, Hog Farm, The Family, Magic Tortoise, among others. The spectacular natural setting and the proximity to the Taos Pueblo also played a key role in these communes. Each commune had a distinctive personality and unique approach to freedom, but a comprehensive exploration of their values lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In general, hippies at these communes sought freedom from many troubling aspects of mainstream society, including what they considered the confines and conformity of a faulty educational system for their children. Iris Keltz wrote that the Taos Learning Center, or TLC, began as an alternative approach to the insufficient curriculum taught by the public schools system. TLC teachers taught history, English and literature, science, and math but they also offered wilderness survival tips, how to build adobe shelters and tipis, and how to farm. "The Taos Learning Center," Keltz

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<sup>98</sup> Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 80.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 226.

claimed, valued and celebrated “individual differences while embracing our common humanity.”<sup>100</sup> John Kimmey, the curriculum director at TLC, based much of the curricula on Hopi culture, and he often journeyed to the Hopi Reservation in Arizona to meet with elders and absorb their wisdom.<sup>101</sup> The West, because of its proximity to Indian groups, provided the ideal venue for the hippies who sought direct knowledge from Indian elders. Each of the five people I interviewed for this chapter spoke of the significance of these tribal teachers in their own spiritual development as well as their decision to settle in the region.

The TLC school also allowed more freedom than typical schools.<sup>102</sup> For example, attendance was not mandatory. “If you weren’t at the Taos Learning Center, you were probably expanding your mind somewhere else, so you could never be absent in the school of life,” Keltz explained. “Homework was what you did at home, like chopping wood or baking bread. Discipline was self-determined. Teachers were not required to take attendance, write lesson plans, or give grades.”<sup>103</sup> Such a large measure of freedom could lead to unintended consequences. From the beginning of the school year, the teachers—all hippies—had noticed that many of the kids were getting stoned before school. Believing that the students needed to understand the history of different drugs among indigenous groups and learn respect and reverence for the mind altering

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<sup>100</sup> Iris Keltz, “TLC: Better Known as Taos Learning Center,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 57.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-66.

chemicals, the teachers decided to offer a course called Safe Drug Use; students were required to return permission slips signed by their parent in order to participate. But this program was quite different from the Just Say No and DARE programs that became popular in public schools a decade later. A teacher explained the course: “For several weeks—with supervision and in a safe environment—the kids were offered a different drug: mushrooms, peyote, LSD and marijuana. The students were required to write a research report before and after the experience.” She observed, “They came away with a profound understanding of how drugs affected their minds and bodies and discovered that most ancient civilizations used some kind of mind-altering drug as a sacrament.”<sup>104</sup>

Many of the long-time residents of the Taos area held a different view of drugs; they disliked the hordes of hippies that descended on the area. They were afraid of pot and acid, nudity and sexual promiscuity, communism, non-Christian religions, and opposition to the war.<sup>105</sup> By 1969, clashes between Taos locals and hippies had become widespread, and were punctuated by violence and even shootouts. Locals were upset that hippies accepted government handouts in the form of food stamps. Locals were also disturbed because hippies were buying up land from their friends and relatives in the name of “dropping out of society;” in the process, they were transforming local society. On top of that, the hippie women sometimes left their shirts off, especially on commune property, which shocked the local people. The locals were both stunned and intrigued by

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>105</sup> Sanders, “Introduction,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 18-19.



the hippies.<sup>106</sup> By 1969, some 2,000 of them resided in the Taos area, while the population of Pueblo of Taos Indians in 1969, by comparison, was about 3,500.

Despite the good intentions of thousands of hippies, most of the Taos area communes failed within a decade, usually from internal struggles. Both Iris Keltz and Joyce Robinson observed that ongoing battles between the hard workers, who wanted to build a strong community, and the partiers, who were more interested in drugs and alcohol and sleeping late than completing chores. This conflict persisted at New Buffalo, as well as most of the other communes, eventually forcing communes to self-destruct.<sup>107</sup> Keltz also blamed the rift that divided those who wanted to create a foundation on which to build a future and those who were curious wanderers just passing through.<sup>108</sup> The members of New Buffalo always fed those who showed up for dinner. At first, Robinson felt the hospitality was a beautiful thing, but after a couple of years, it became tiring. New Buffalo was originally designed to cater to families, but after its creation, few families moved onto the commune, and the presence of many single men led families to become concerned about the safety of their children.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Keltz, "First Encounters with New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 35.

<sup>107</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, "Founding Settler of New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43-44.

<sup>108</sup> Keltz, "Close Encounters with New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, "Founding Settler of New Buffalo," in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43-44.

The communes also lost their sense of purpose as the hoards of visitors appeared and disappeared. The original vision left New Buffalo when the founding families departed the commune. New Buffalo soon became a group of “disillusioned burned-out hippies who didn’t know what to do next,” Keltz lamented. “The commune had become a group of individual hoarders.”<sup>110</sup> The members began stashing food items in their rooms rather than sharing equally and communally. In fact, as she neared the end of her stay at New Buffalo, all aspects were much less communal. Prayer circles, group meals, and fires in the circle room became rare occurrences. Her hopes were momentarily renewed one day when visitors gave everyone some mescaline and the fire burned in the drumming room until the sun rose the next morning. During that night, members played music, shared food, and made love down at the hot springs under the full moon as they had in days past. After the mescaline wore off, however, the harmony evaporated.<sup>111</sup> New Buffalo slowly faded away. For many years, it survived as a bed-and-breakfast inn with visitors from around the world arriving to ask questions about this little corner of the counterculture, perhaps feeling a bond or believing that the seeds that were planted there were still germinating, waiting to bloom.<sup>112</sup>

Eventually, communards lost all faith in the Taos hippie commune movement. “When someone washed dirty socks and underwear in the hot springs,” Keltz recalled, “I

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<sup>110</sup> Keltz, “Close Encounters with New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 49.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>112</sup> Staci Matlock, “New Buffalo ends an Era,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 230.

lost hope for the peace and harmony promised by the Aquarian Age.”<sup>113</sup> “In the beginning we jumped into this new life feeling that each person who lived and ate there would be a contributing party,” Robinson remembered. But it didn’t turn out that way.<sup>114</sup> Some residents left the communes with mixed feelings and a sense of disillusionment, but all of them seemed to have gained something of value. Keltz wrote that, in the end, “New Buffalo nurtured me and became my home in spite of the disappointments.”<sup>115</sup> She did not think her time spent at the commune was wasted and had more positive than negative feelings about her experiences. Robinson observed, “The only communes I ever heard of that worked were committed to religious or political ideals, but back to the land isn’t enough.”<sup>116</sup>

Although most of the other Taos area communes have disappeared, the movement itself was not a complete failure. Keltz, who compiled the written essays, oral histories, and newspaper articles for a published “scrapbook” observed that, time and again, “People affirmed that the experience of living in them altered their perspective forever and, in some cases, saved a life.” Although the communes did not free America, the commune experience freed individuals. “There are countless stories of scruffy vagabonds

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<sup>113</sup> Keltz, “Close Encounters with New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 53.

<sup>114</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 44

<sup>115</sup> Keltz, “Close Encounters with New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 53.

<sup>116</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43-44.

and lost souls who wandered into these refuges without a dime, sometimes without the ability to articulate a coherent sentence, but who left ready to take their places in the larger world. There was no ‘therapeutic program.’ There was acceptance.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Keltz maintained that her experiences at New Buffalo changed her life for the better. Joyce Robinson, despite her disappointments, felt supported and made long-lasting friendships during her time at New Buffalo. “Part of what happens in a commune is a reconstruction of a tribal society--that is what drew me in the first place to the commune, the support system,” she recalled. “People were made to share and interact. The commune replaced the support system we had rejected.”<sup>118</sup>

Writing in 1976, after spending many years at New Buffalo, Kopecky still had not given up on his dreams, despite the collapse of most of the other Taos area communes. He pondered, “Can the people slow down the pollution, even reverse it? Can we achieve real disarmament, less world tensions and apply our resources to the accumulating problems of mankind? Will we further brotherhood and one day not have such a divided world?” And he concluded, “I certainly still believe we will get there.”<sup>119</sup> Kopecky and most of the former members of the Taos communes still hold strong to their beliefs as well as their hope for a more peaceful, spiritually minded planet. They do not feel that they failed, but rather that they took the first large step of an ongoing revolutionary-

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<sup>117</sup> Keltz, “Preface,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 24-25.

<sup>118</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 43-44.

<sup>119</sup> Kopecky, *New Buffalo*, 283.

evolutionary process of creating a better world and that their attempts can serve as models for the future.

The hippie experiment was successful on another level: some of these seekers found a form of freedom, especially spiritual freedom. Many of the Taos hippies discarded drugs and alcohol to explore spirituality, often in the Native American Church.<sup>120</sup> The NAC meetings also helped many of them to understand the experiences they had had on LSD, mushrooms, and other drugs and to place those experiences within a spiritual tradition. Originally, they thought ingesting peyote was a new way to get high, but eventually many moved away from alcohol, other drugs, and sometimes cigarettes to follow the Peyote Road. A number of the hippies from the Taos communes grew spiritually and ethically.

Former commune residents today live their lives in accordance with their earlier ideals. Joyce Robinson, who began New Buffalo with lofty dreams of a spiritual community, left the commune and became a born-again Christian. Her relationship with Jesus, which grew in the NAC, has been the bedrock of her life for well over two decades. Iris Keltz, friend and fellow former-communard, observed, “In a fearful world, Joyce has found great peace. Everything she was searching for in the commune she found in Jesus.”<sup>121</sup> Barbara Durkee, a former member of Lama, a major spiritual commune in Taos, helped her fellow communard Ram Dass write *Be Here Now*, which became popular among hippies interested in alternative spirituality. She is now an artist,

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<sup>120</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 226.

<sup>121</sup> Robinson, as told to Iris Keltz, “Founding Settler of New Buffalo,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 44.

but also works as a registered nurse. She still practices the Japanese tea ceremony where she incorporates many of the ideas and concepts from *Be Here Now*.<sup>122</sup> Morgan Haynes, a former student at the Taos Learning Center, was influenced by his communal upbringing. He is training to become a doctor of oriental medicine, embarking on an alternative or New Age medical career, and is planning to build a stone self-sufficient solar home.<sup>123</sup> Despite his youth, he still absorbed much of the counterculture philosophy.

Each of the five people I interviewed for this chapter told me, without hesitation, that they thought the counterculture and the Taos commune movement succeeded. “I think the 60's didn't fail at all, the counterculture, I think it actually succeeded,” Iris Keltz said. “It didn't succeed in maybe the way we dreamed of, like New Buffalo didn't maintain a village there,” she acknowledged, but, “a lot the values that came from there, a lot of the older forms were rediscovered.”<sup>124</sup> I asked SD Youngwolf what he and the hippies who moved to Taos hoped to accomplish. “To live a spiritual life,” he declared, expounding, “many of these people had grown up in a very materialistic life in which something was missing and that’s why there was the hippie revolution,” he explained. “There was a lot of prosperity after World War II but it was a very materialistic kind of

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<sup>122</sup> Barbara Durkee, as told to Iris Keltz, “Mama Lama,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 133.

<sup>123</sup> Morgan Haynes, as told to Iris Keltz, “TLC and the Counterculture: A Kid’s Perspective,” in *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, ed. Iris Keltz, 70-71.

<sup>124</sup> Iris Keltz, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 6 November 2012, transcription p. 10, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

thing that a bunch of young people rebelled against, especially once they experienced what LSD and things had to show them, and they realized how disconnected were the lives that they had had, from the Earth and from the life that surrounded them, and they wanted to get more in touch with that and live that,” he said. “What they were seeking really, although we couldn’t have phrased it that way was, ‘the sacred,’ that’s what we were searching for, ‘the sacred.’” I then asked, “Do you think you succeeded or failed in that?” Youngwolf responded, without hesitation, “Oh, I’ve succeeded, yeah.”<sup>125</sup> “I’m very happy with where I am in my life,” he added, “if, when I was twenty four, if you had asked me where I would see myself, and where I would want to be at my age now, I would probably say, to be totally enlightened,” he remembered, laughing. “Well, I’ve come a long way, I might not be there, but I feel like it’s not as important to get there . . . I saw this thing on Facebook this morning, it said, ‘happiness is not a goal, it’s the path,’ and that’s kind of the way I feel, sacred is what you live, day to day.” He concluded, “if I want to intensify that it’s up to me, I can do that if I want, and I come in and out of times of maybe a lot of spiritual practice and then I’ll go for a time with none, and then I’ll come back to it, I’m on my way to Peru now . . .”<sup>126</sup> Youngwolf planned to participate in a ceremony at Machu Pichu during the month he would spend in Peru.

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<sup>125</sup> SD Youngwolf, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 4-5, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>126</sup> SD Youngwolf, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 5, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

While documenting the communes of northern New Mexico through photographs and writing, Irwin B. Klein successfully shifted the focus away from the idea of the new settlers as hippies by drawing comparisons between the new immigrants and earlier pioneers and independent yeoman farmers.<sup>127</sup> An astute observer of events as they unfolded, Klein witnessed among the communards, “the enduring mythology fed by Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, first unveiled in a public lecture in 1893. An important part of this mythology is faith in the West as a land of renewal and independence.”<sup>128</sup> Perhaps unconsciously, hippies, “drew on the white mythology of the American West, imagining it as a place where unfettered men had been free to remake themselves. The myth of the frontier as the place where Euro-Americans experienced a regeneration of moral character through violence and contact with wilderness had come to them through popular media: fiction, the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner on American history textbooks, and the television genre of the adult Western.” The hippies, however, did not align themselves with the Manifest Destiny philosophy of triumph of democracy, progress, and Christianity. Hippie men’s long hair emulated Native Americans as the Noble Savage, “but also echoed the clash between the predominantly male and lawless population of trappers, rustlers, bandits, speculators, miners, and squatters . . . and the forces of American gentility who came after.”<sup>129</sup> The hippies,

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<sup>127</sup> Benjamin Klein and Tim Hodgdon, “From Innocence to Experience: Irwin B. Klein and ‘The New Settlers of Northern New Mexico, 1967-1971,’” *New Mexico Historical Review* 87, no. 1, (2012), 86.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>129</sup> Tim Hodgdon, *Manhood in the Age of Aquarius: Masculinity in Two Countercultural Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 49.



although breaking from mainstream values, followed a pattern set down by generations of Americans before them seeking freedom and rebirth in sparsely inhabited regions of the West.<sup>130</sup>

Many hippies originally craved absolute freedom but they eventually realized the necessity of placing limits on certain freedoms. “In the early days of hip bohemianism, many dreamed that humans might find a way to live in a state of perpetual ecstatic liminality, liberated completely from the limitations of social structure,” historians Benjamin Klein and Tim Hodgdon noted, “a possibility seemingly revealed in the course of experimentation with psychedelic drugs, anarchistic forms of moneyless economy, open-land communalism, and Asian mysticism.”<sup>131</sup> During the early days of the hippie movement, roughly 1965-1967, historian Jay Stevens observed, “It felt as if they were riding a high and beautiful wave.”<sup>132</sup> Hippies thought they would change the world, with little effort—as if predestined—and create a harmonious heaven on earth. Many hippies who thought, “they had experienced the oneness of all things with the help of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) . . . gradually became convinced that there were earthly limits to this transcendence.” Eventually, many seekers of chemical transcendence came to realize that, “the ecstatic state of antistructure,” they had experienced in the psychedelic state, “necessary as hippies thought it was to human welfare—could last only for a moment.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Klein, “From Innocence to Experience,” 87-88.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>132</sup> Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 331.

<sup>133</sup> Klein, “From Innocence to Experience,” 86.

Many psychedelic seekers eventually turned to yoga, meditation, and other spiritual practices in order to maintain the level of awareness they found on drugs.

Hippies thought that mainstream Americans were inflicted by, “an ‘uptight’ overemphasis on structure and order.”<sup>134</sup> Klein and Hodgdon observed that hippies residing in communes, “remained in the grips of an illusion that the new social order would emerge spontaneously in the absence of any structure at all.” Eventually, some hippies realized that some rules and organization were necessary. In 1976, Arthur Kopecky described in his journal, his, “growing impatience with the stagnation that resulted from,” the notion at New Buffalo, “that each member must be free to do his or her own thing.” Kopecky expressed his changed attitude, ““We want business—no more food stamps or welfare or being so broke.”” This signaled a radical break from the “anything goes” attitude of many of the residents. “The choice to pursue economic self-sufficiency required residents to commit to a common vision,” Klein and Hodgdon observed, and commune members would have to, “sacrifice a measure of individual autonomy in exchange for the economic that they could achieve through coordinated, collective effort.” Kopecky’s move toward greater structure met with strong opposition. Displeased members left New Buffalo but returned a few months later, “to reclaim the commune at gunpoint in the name of the original dream: to reach a state of never-ending ecstasy through the rejection of all imposed order.”<sup>135</sup> Kopeck subsequently left New Buffalo and the commune, in turn, slowly fell apart. In the fall of 1968, another hippie,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 87.

Peter Coyote, pondered, while recuperating from an attack of serum hepatitis, “the contrast between his comrades' glowing vision of a world populated by robust life-actors and his own fragile state. If freedom really *was* the absence of all limits,” he wondered, “then how could frail humans—so prone to disease, aging, and the consequences of overindulgence—ever be truly free?” He met with a shaman who urged him, “to bring his daily practices into a more consistent relationship with his spiritual beliefs and to reduce his reliance on destructive drugs.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, the freedom hippies sought through drug use and rejection of order, most found through spiritual practice.

Spirituality was the heart and soul of the Taos communes and the counterculture. “Participants and observers alike have commented on the elusive but central role of spirituality in the counterculture in general and communes in particular,” historian Stephen Fox noted. “Although popular press often emphasized drugs and naïveté, the feelings that careful observers perceived were essentially religious. As Terry Klein, wife of the founder of New Buffalo, noted, ‘There was really a religious movement going on here, but it’s hard to put your finger on what to call it.’”<sup>137</sup> Each of the five people I interviewed talked about spirituality and mystical experience as almost commonplace.

Many Taos communards experienced some of the four elements evident in mystical experience as laid out by philosopher William James in *Varieties of Religious*

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<sup>136</sup> Hodgdon, *Manhood in the Age of Aquarius*, 284; Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall: A Chronicle* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 167-72.

<sup>137</sup> Stephen Fox, “Boomer Dharma: The Evolution of Alternative Spiritual Communities in Modern new Mexico,” In Ferenc Szasz and Richard Etalain (eds.), *Religion in Modern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 151; original quote from Stephen Fox interview, 30 July 1993; See also, Lisa Law, *Flashing on the Sixties* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987), 77.

*Experience.* When I asked Robbie Gordon about mystical experiences being difficult to describe, he responded succinctly, “That goes without saying.” He expounded that, yes, psychedelic states are extremely difficult to describe with words. I then asked him about a second aspect of mystical states, such as states of insight, illuminations, and revelations. “Alright, this definitely applies to all of our experiences with acid and mushrooms . . . It was one revelation after another, the nature of the universe,” he explained. “The peyote way, he continued, “it channeled your visions, and I thought this was very cleverly done. The power of being in that space, and the drum, and fire, it channels your vision, really, so they aren’t all over the map, you know, there’s a certain thing in there that everybody has in common, and you’re in there praying together,” he said. “I thought this was psychedelic engineering of a very sophisticated sort. These people know how to use this psychedelic experience . . . I thought it was very sophisticated and still do. It saved a lot of people from alcoholism, and a lot of things.”<sup>138</sup>

Interestingly, some of the people I interviewed disagreed with James’ assertion that mystical states are transient, passing quickly. “I think it’s not completely useful to say that it’s . . . completely transient,” Gordon argued. “Our lives were changed by psychedelic experiences, I would say.”<sup>139</sup> When I asked Susan Suazo about this, she replied, “Oh, you never are the same, you never are the same.” She elaborated, “we were brought up to think that this, the material world, was the only way to go, that there was

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<sup>138</sup> Robbie Gordon, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 28 November 2012, transcription p. 12, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

[sic] certain things you had to do, and certain things you had to become, and certain things you had to carry out.” After exploring spirituality and having mystical experiences, we realized, “that we have to change everything, or get into that which is really real, really eternal, really the truth.”<sup>140</sup> I then asked Suazo if she felt grasped, held, or overpowered by a divine force. She exclaimed, “Bigtime, and more and more everyday now.” Suazo expounded, “when I get the guidance from Spirit, when I quiet my mind from the incessant thinking, then we’re filled with that power, and the Spirit even takes our tongue and speaks through us, this is what I’m going for is to be more and more like that so that when you reach out to somebody and you touch them . . . we’re giving each other pure Spirit.” Her main goal in life now is to, “become a more clear conduit so Spirit can manifest on this Earth, and especially now, people,” she observed, “they look so sad, or so frightened, or there’s so much suffering . . . I don’t know what I do in particular but at least if I can make a person laugh or smile, Spirit might speak through me and give me some good words that makes them have hope, or feel better, or they laugh, or I hug them, and they feel good . . . that’s the job, that’s the main duty.”<sup>141</sup>

Ultimately, many hippies who migrated to Taos said they had sought, and found, freedom. “It’s total freedom,” Susan Suazo told me, “because once you know that,” she said, speaking of the spiritual revelations she had, “we were programmed to believe that

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<sup>140</sup> Susan Suazo, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 9, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>141</sup> Susan Suazo, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 9-10, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

the material world was all there is, but now that we are understanding a part of more of a spiritual world, that's a total freedom, because you know that whether you live, whether you die, no matter what happens, that this presence within you, nobody can take it away, it's yours forever, and this is the only thing that's eternal." She concluded, "it is a huge freedom."<sup>142</sup> Youngwolf told me he explored sexual freedom, "and found it had its limits." He explained that, "the next kind of freedom was . . . states of consciousness that drugs took me to." It, "was a kind of freedom where I transcended the bounds of the material world, and that, that was real freedom, you know . . . that was what made me want to begin the study and practice of yoga and meditation in order to reach that state in a way where I wouldn't have to come back." Youngwolf explained how Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert formed IFIF, the International Federation for Internal Freedom after they were kicked out of Harvard. Unlike many gurus from India, who had only negative things to say about LSD and other drugs, Neem Karoli Baba, Alpert's and Youngwolf's guru, "said that LSD could open the door to Christ . . . but you can't stay there . . . only love can take you there to where you stay there." Youngwolf's spiritual quest, his desire to reach that "love" state permanently, guided his life. "I've come to," he explained, "I think to be totally free is to be enlightened, but it's more of an internal than an external state."<sup>143</sup> Gail Russell told me she had a desire to share her spiritual ideas and beliefs

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<sup>142</sup> Susan Suazo, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 8, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>143</sup> SD Youngwolf, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 6-7, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

with the world through her artwork and, “I feel like I’ve got several books in me.”<sup>144</sup>

Youngwolf, too, hoped to express his ideas and beliefs, especially through his artwork.

When asked what he hoped to convey, he responded, “Beauty, bliss, Spirit,” and

concluded, “the sacred, the sacred.”<sup>145</sup>

These hordes of America’s youth who began relocating to the American West in record numbers by the late 1960s sought to escape from the conventional American consumer world and created a new alternative society modeled on Taos Pueblo culture. Perhaps it was silly for the young city kids to think they could instantly live off the land like the Pueblo people, having little or no agricultural experience themselves and lacking the long traditions handed down for generations among the Indians. Many left during the first harsh winter or after the first crops failed. On the surface, these attempts at communes did not succeed and most no longer exist. The hippie experiment was not, however, a complete failure for all participants. Some did find the freedom they sought.<sup>146</sup> Those who lived on the communes said that the experience profoundly impacted their lives in positive ways. Often they found what they were searching for through spiritual avenues, either during their residence on the communes or, sometimes, after leaving. The beliefs and the ideals held by the Taos hippies are still alive, and their story is not yet over.

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<sup>144</sup> Gail Russell, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 2 December 2012, transcription p. 5, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>145</sup> SD Youngwolf, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 9, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>146</sup> Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas*, 226.

## CONCLUSION

The lives and experiences of John Muir, the Taos Society of Artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Everett Ruess, Edith Warner, Jack Kerouac, and the Taos communards at New Buffalo symbolize a recurring theme in America: rejection of mainstream American society and embrace of a vastly different lifestyle in the West that offered an opportunity for rebirth. Their stories and experiences are not unique to American History. Charles Fletcher Lummis, Mary Austin, Woody Guthrie, Edward Abbey, and many others searched the West on the same quest for freedom—most found their treasure.<sup>1</sup>

Their stories are all ultimately about freedom. These men and women were seekers. They sought and found physical, social, psychological, and spiritual freedom in a majestic western landscape. A considerable part of the appeal of the West lay in its land and the sharp contrast between the original landscape each was leaving behind and the vastly different environs they discovered. Their relationships with Native peoples became increasingly important. After the Taos society of Artists, Mary Austin, and Charles Fletcher Lummis had spread words and images of praise for America's original inhabitants, the following generations of Western immigrants sought direct interactions with the indigenous population as a path toward the authenticity lacked in their previous lives. They found what they sought. After stripping away layers of opinions and societal beliefs, they liberated their minds and souls in the radiant landscapes of the American

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<sup>1</sup> In future research I plan on tracing these ideas further back in history. I will explore the Mormon exodus, the Penitente Brotherhood, and the Vecino Society of the eighteenth century.



West, where they discovered courage, identity, spirituality, and above all freedom. Although they sought this freedom for themselves, they often chose to share their discoveries with America and even the world. People are still drawn to the words and lives of these men and women because they modeled a level of freedom many Americans never experience. They discovered liberation came through freeing themselves from societal beliefs and finding a profound spiritual relationship with nature and a revised concept of God. These men and women created their own paths up the proverbial spiritual mountain, discovered their own truths, despite lack of understanding by family, friends, and a society that wondered why they could not be practical. The landscape of the American West provided the ideal setting for their journeys toward freedom.

After John Muir felt a divine presence in the solitude of the Pacific Coast's wilderness, he spread his wilderness gospel, urging others to follow his path. Late in life, as the effects of industrialization became more apparent, he fought intensive political battles to save natural areas for future generations.

The Taos Society of Artists and Mabel Dodge Luhan perceived the Southwestern landscape in a similar fashion. However, the emigrants to northern New Mexico also credited the Tiwa people of Taos Pueblo for hastening their own spiritual transformations. They hoped to influence Easterners through their writing and artwork, illustrating the Indian alternative to the increasing consumerism and pollution they associated with the cities.

Everett Ruess crafted an individual search for freedom. Although he was not escaping a constrictive youth like Muir, he encountered a landscape that changed him dramatically. Since Ruess died at age twenty, he never had the opportunity to spread *his*

Wilderness gospel. In his book *Mormon Country*, Wallace Stegner also drew comparisons between Ruess and Muir. “What Everett Ruess was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it.” He concluded, “If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age.”<sup>2</sup> Muir and Ruess did indeed have much in common. They both found liberation, but only Muir returned from his wanderings to publish accounts of his discoveries.

Edith Warner found her salvation along the banks of the Rio Grande surrounded by her protective mesas. Her writing documents a transformation brought on by the shimmering landscape and the wisdom she gained from her San Ildefonso friends.

Arriving a full century after Muir, the Taos hippies, too, found liberation in the West. They, too, spread *their* gospel. The hippies had a grander vision than their predecessors. Although they awakened in the western landscape and saw nature as a key, they also saw communal living in harmony with the land as the answer to a troubling modernity. All of the subjects of this dissertation were seekers, and all discovered freedom and a spiritual connection with nature which they interpreted as God.

Each of the people investigated in these pages became a cultural broker and a messenger. Historian Margaret Connell-Szasz explains, “During the five centuries of contact between native and non-native people of the Americas, thousands of these intermediaries have moved across the cultural frontiers of the continent. Some were

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<sup>2</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 321.

interpreters, others mediated spiritual understanding.” Traders and diplomats served as mediators. “Others forged bonds between native and outside cultures.” Connell Szasz elaborates, “Intermediaries became repositories of two or more cultures . . . their lives reflected a complexity unknown to those living within the confines of a single culture. They know how the “other side” thought and behaved.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did most of these subjects operate as an intermediary between native and non-native cultures, each also served as a liaison between the physical and spiritual realms. John Muir, most Taos artists, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Everett Ruess, Edith Warner, and a number of Taos hippies became acutely aware they were traveling in both the physical and spiritual worlds; they often knew their purpose on this earth was to bring messages and comfort from the spiritual. A form of intermediary, they traveled the frontiers of mind and spirit. In a time of increased cultural pluralism and intermingling, wisdom can be taken from these cultural brokers. Unknown cultures and frontier regions, the “other,” need not be feared, value can often be gained by opening our minds and hearts.

Countless Americans undertook this quest for freedom and meaning in the West. Take Colin Fletcher, for example. He entered the Grand Canyon in 1963, searching for meaning and purpose. He spent the next two months hiking the entire length of the canyon—over one hundred miles, from the western edge of the park to the eastern border—meandering along the Colorado River when possible; the first to accomplish this feat. His journey, like the stories contained within these pages, was a spiritual quest. He overcame the fear of his own insignificance, noting, “by overcoming this fear I had freed

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Connell-Szasz, *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 6.

myself. . . . I had freed myself from our dogmas.”<sup>4</sup> Near the end of his trek, as his body and mind wandered in the vast canyon, he realized he had found not only new knowledge, but humility and wisdom. He looked forward to “A time when [mankind] lives in harmony not only with the rest of the animal world but with the rock and rolling hills, with the forests and rivers, with the desert and the oceans and the uncorrupted air.”<sup>5</sup> After travels in the canyon strengthened his spiritual connection, he longed for a time of increased peace, harmony, and compassion. As his journey came to an end, he concluded, “You cannot escape the age you live in: you are a product of it. You have to stand back from time to time and get your perspectives right. But then you have to come back and resume the task of contributing in your own way to your own age.”<sup>6</sup> Most of the people in the preceding pages understood this and returned to contribute to the society of which they were a part. Everett Ruess never came back, neither did Christopher McCandless.

McCandless, like Ruess, came from an affluent family. In April 1992, he hitchhiked to Alaska where he wandered alone into the wilderness near Mt. McKinley. He abandoned his car, gave \$25,000 to charity, burned his remaining cash, left behind most of his possessions, and entered the wild. Four months later, a moose hunter found McCandless’s decomposed body.<sup>7</sup> His last letter, to a friend, was eerily reminiscent of

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Fletcher, *The Man Who Walked Through Time* (New York: Random House, 1967), 211.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), [v-vii].

Ruess's final correspondence: "Greetings from Fairbanks! This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne. Arrived here two days ago. It was very difficult to catch rides in the Yukon Territory. But I finally got here. Please return all mail I receive to the sender. It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves to be fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild. Alex."<sup>8</sup> He signed the letter Alex rather than Chris because he, like Ruess, had changed names. Christopher McCandless became Alex Supertramp. He wrote his final message a week before he died of starvation. "I have had a happy life," he reported, "and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all."<sup>9</sup> Response to McCandless's experience illustrates how the West's wilderness continues to attract young men seeking liberation from the demands of society. McCandless's story reached many people through Jon Krakauer's initial article in *Outside* magazine and his biography *Into the Wild*. After his tale appeared, the editors of *Outside* an avalanche of mail in response to the article.<sup>10</sup> But the story recently reached a much larger audience when Paramount released the movie *Into the Wild* in September 2007. With the appearance of this film, almost forty years after the release of *Easy Rider*, a major movie company made a handsome return on its costly investment, reminding us of the continued draw of freedom in the western wilds.

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<sup>8</sup> Chris McCandless to Wayne Westerberg, April 27, 1992 in Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 190.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, [vii].

Deepak Chopra, one of the most popular spiritual teachers of the early twenty first century, offers a similar message about spiritual freedom in nature. Author of over forty books, Chopra blends Vedanta, Karma, Hinduism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Western Science, quantum physics, and consciousness theories.<sup>11</sup> In *Life after Death*, Chopra advises his readers to “Go out into Nature and sink into the feeling that this is your home. Respect and nourish the ecosystem. Do not harm other living things. See Nature without fear or hostility.” While immersed in nature, he suggests one should try to feel “reverence for life.”<sup>12</sup> These words echo Thoreau, Muir, Luhan, Ruess, Warner, and the creators of New Buffalo. Like them, Chopra equated God and Nature.

The West provided a superlative setting for the seekers’ perception of God and Nature. “God is not set off from the creation; they are the same,” observed former Taos communitarian, Jim Levy.<sup>13</sup> “We’re in love with Taos, it’s our community; Eden,” wrote an anonymous Taos communitarian in *Fountain of Light*. She added that entering into a

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<sup>11</sup> Deepak Chopra, *Life after Death: The Burden of Proof* (New York: Random House, 2006), [xiv, xi]; Iris Keltz noted how interesting it is that quantum physics is now proving the experiences she had and understood intuitively over forty years ago, Iris Keltz, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 6 November 2012, transcription p. 6-7, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Many of the hippies blended their spiritual beliefs in similar fashion. SD Youngwolf, for example, discussed how he travelled parallel spiritual paths for much of his life—Native American and Eastern (Hinduism and Buddhism). In the past ten years, he has “really brought them together.” SD Youngwolf, interview by Brian King, digital audio recording, 30 November 2012, transcription p. 10, will be archived at University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>12</sup> Chopra, *Life after Death*, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Levy, “Call and Answer,” in *Fountain of Light* #12 (Arroyo Seco, N.M.: Rainbow Publications, 1970), 8-9.

harmonious relationship with the natural world creates Eden.<sup>14</sup> As to freedom, Levy observed, “We’re free to recognize our bondage and we’re bound to realize our freedom.”<sup>15</sup> But how do we become free? “The truth shall set you free,” explained George Bacon, another former Taos communitarian. “But what is the truth?” he asked. “What is true for you is not necessarily true for someone else,” he explained. “The age of the enlightened man [is here]. We are beginning to realize that the knowledge, all knowledge is within us, you and me. Everyone is a guru. . . . We no longer need the avatar, yoga, guru . . . to guide us there. WE ARE THERE! HERE.” He then elaborated that freedom is within. “Every man has within him . . . the strength to turn the key which unlocks the door of his own enlightenment. No one else can do it for us. . . . Let us go out and enjoy the dawn, and bless the day, knowing that WE ARE . . . . FREE.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately that is the theme of each of these stories. In the West, each of these seekers discarded old ideas and found knowledge within themselves—they discovered they were free, as individuals, while Americans as a whole was not yet free. These seekers urged Americans to reconnect with nature—with God—to listen, to awaken, and to change course. In a word, to become free.

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<sup>14</sup> “Ecological Disaster?” in *Fountain of Light* #12 (Arroyo Seco, N.M.: Rainbow Publications, 1970), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Levy, “Call and Answer,” in *Fountain of Light* #12 (Arroyo Seco, N.M.: Rainbow Publications, 1970), 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> George Bacon, “The Divine Heresy,” in *Fountain of Light* #12 (Arroyo Seco, N.M.: Rainbow Publications, 1970), 18.

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