

Past President's Address 1993 « Western Literature Association

AN EASTERN DUDE RIDES WEST—AGAIN

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Asked for a title for this address, I at first toyed with “A Tenderfoot Rides West.” I am, after all, the first WLA president to come from an eastern university, to have eastern roots, to have spent virtually all of his life east of the Mississippi. But tenderfoot hardly seemed right. I have been a WLA member for too long, and you have charged me with *too* many tasks for that sobriquet to work. You’ve rewarded me with merit badges and unbounded good fellowship—and in 1992 the honor of Head Scout. Thank you for the spurs.

So I opted for *dude*, which in one of its meanings carries the eastern connotation. Definition number one of my dictionary reads, “An easterner or city person who vacations on a western ranch.” Listed as slang in definition three, *dude* is “a fellow, a chap.” In any sense, the word is informal, as this address is designed to be. For any tautology, apologies.

The label *West* is, of course, a much more slippery word than *dude*. It conveys history as well as mythology. At the University of Michigan, we sang—and folks there still sing—“Hail, hail to Michigan, the champions of the West.” Michigan originated as a part of the Northwest Territory. “Easterners” certainly thought of it as a wild, wild West. As late as 1866, when native Ohioan William Dean Howells published *Venetian Life*, James Russell Lowell expressed amazement that a book of such “airy elegance” could have been written by someone from “the rough-and-ready West.” Such attitudes survived Lowell. I recall from my undergraduate days Austin Warren’s explaining to Michigan students that cultured Bostonians thought of anything west of Pittsburgh as one vast region known as “Ioway.” Easterners are wont to make midwesterners feel like westerners.

But though the tension between East and West has been one ingredient of American life, historically the pull west has been the dominant pull. Most Americans, in some ways, have been westerners. In his whole life, Thomas Jefferson never ventured more than a few miles west of Monticello, but he it was who maneuvered the Louisiana Purchase; he it was who sent Lewis and Clark on their great journey to the Pacific. To good purpose, J. Golden Taylor included Cambridge, Mass., poet E. E. Cummings in his anthology of western American literature, along with Robert Frost, who, though born in San Francisco, is counted the great poet of New England experience. Easterners and midwesterners of my generation and the generation before me grew up with a vision of the West. We thought about it a lot. We were guided by Zane Grey and a host of other popular writers who wrote Westerns. Almost weekly, we would see at least one Western film, sometimes more. And West was where California lay—still the promised land in those pre-Joan Didion days.

And so I remember the adventure of my first trip to the trans-Mississippi West. In graduate school, I thought a change of scene for a summer would enhance my preparations—two summer sessions in one summer at Berkeley would allow me to make a good start on my German, and I could take a couple of English courses besides. It was a happy choice: thirteen weeks on the campus by the Bay, in what seemed to me weather close to that of Heaven. It was wonderfully rewarding. One weekend took me to Yosemite, another to Napa Valley, and on another I flew to Los Angeles to see an aunt and uncle I hadn't seen in years and a cousin I had never met. Los Angeles didn't seem very different from Detroit, but Yosemite was terrain that spoke adventure. Unlike the owl in Mark Twain's "Baker's Blue Jay Yarn," I was not disappointed. Mostly, of course, I was taking in the ambience of Berkeley and San Francisco. My thoughts had been Western in a larger sense mainly on the cross-country drive to Berkeley. How wonderful it was—and how keen was that very special moment when our automobile crossed the Mississippi. I was in the West.

I relived the magic of my first crossing some fifteen years later, when Scribner's published Hemingway's *The Nick Adams Stories*. It contained a fragment that Philip Young titled, aptly enough, "Crossing the Mississippi." This was probably Hemingway's first attempt at a story set west of the Mississippi. Nick is bound, apparently, for Kansas City, though we don't know why. It may not be a bad guess that he was going to begin work on a newspaper. It's October of 1917. News of a White Sox victory over New York in the World Series cheers Nick, helps him check the wasteland images that he sees as his train pauses before making its crossing. Nick takes with him the optimism that many travelers from the East or Midwest took as they made that crossing. Hemingway wrote, "Crossing the Mississippi would be a' big event [Nick] thought, and he wanted to enjoy every minute of it." The reality is different from what Nick had expected, but he observes carefully as the train progresses over the long bridge, "The river seemed to move solidly downstream, not to flow but to move like a solid, shifting lake, swirling a little where the abutments of the bridge jutted out. Mark Twain, Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, and LaSalle crowded each other in Nick's mind as he looked up the flat, brown plain of slow-moving water. 'Anyhow, I've seen the Mississippi,' he thought happily to himself." A force of nature against a man-made structure, an author, his living characters, a French explorer "crowd" Nick's mind—history and nature and myth and literature. Nick has one of those highly satisfying moments that Hemingway occasionally gave him: "'Anyhow, I've seen the Mississippi,' he thought." The moment was so ecstatic that Hemingway stopped writing with that sentence. He didn't give us a story, but the fragment satisfactorily catches a special moment that many Americans have experienced, me included, upon crossing the great river.

For Americans who cross that river east to west, there are usually consequences, often great consequences. Sometimes lives are changed unalterably. And many a Western story describes such transformation. Think about the easterner of Crane's "The Blue Hotel." The West has challenged his notion of himself, and he knows that he failed the test. His view of human nature will be ever dark: "Johnnie was cheating. I saw him. I know it. And I refused to stand up and be a man." The poor Swede of Crane's story was also a newcomer to the West, so caught up by his own stereotypes of the West that he ensured his own death. Though strangers sometimes meet violent ends, writers have also enjoyed describing positive transformations. We think of the narrator of Owen

Wister's *The Virginian* and of Molly Stark Wood.

Going west makes a difference not only in literature, but in life. Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Jack Schaefer, Willa Cather, Mary Hallock Foote, and a host of others provide ready examples. Of course, the Western Literature Association itself has its own history of consequences of eastern visits to the West. You will be interested in one of the most recent. Last year, Doris Betts of North Carolina gave the keynote address at WLA. Her novel *Heading West* described consequences of an unscheduled visit west by Nancy Finch, a librarian from North Carolina: Nancy had been kidnapped. At WLA, southerner Betts discussed her use of Western themes in that novel and reflected on the influence of Western writing on her. But while she was in Reno, Betts was listening and observing—as writers do. When Thomas Wolfe had visited Reno some fifty years earlier, he had been fascinated with the gaudiness of the city's chief industry and all that surrounds it. Betts quickly got by that pleasure seeking and focused her inner eye elsewhere. She went on our Saturday outing, and it proved for her to be more than a tourist's excursion. The country around Reno, especially Donner Lake and its surroundings, spoke to her. At WLA, Betts found the theme and setting for her next novel. She is now subscribing to the Sparks, Nevada, newspaper, suggesting that her novel won't be a retelling of the Donner excursion. As Betts says, that has already been done, by Vardis Fisher and others, all of which she has been busily reading. But the Donner story will be reflected in her theme.

A graduate student when I first crossed the Mississippi, I was about to meet dimensions of the West I hadn't before considered. A couple of years later in a seminar, I became acquainted with the work of Vardis Fisher. The rest is history. Through his work, I was often in imagination west of the Mississippi. The next physical trip I took was, in fact, to Hagerman, Idaho, and the Fisher ranch. That was a weekend to remember! It personalized a correspondence with Fisher that had been under way, one that after Fisher's death was extended to Opal Fisher.

I learned from Fisher about the founding of the Western Literature Association, though several meetings would pass before I attended my first one. Back East, a member of MLA and SMLA, I was making my way, with much naiveté, in a new region on a modest salary at a university with limited travel budgets. Attending WLA seemed a remote and exotic possibility. I'll be ever grateful to Wilber Stevens of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for his telephone call inviting me to be on a panel on the works of Vardis Fisher. "I'll do it," I said. Now I stress to graduate students: "You are your dissertation."

The year of my first WLA meeting was 1975, the place Durango. My flight took me through Denver. In that airport, you knew you weren't in the East or the Midwest. The clue was in the garb of all those Western Dudes—the cowboy boots and hats and the bolos. The women, however, could have been from Atlanta. As Melville might say, "Surely there is meaning in these things." And I remember the Durango airport. That confirmed that I was in the West.

If the airport was small and remotely located, that quickly became unimportant. Western welcome really began there, for a group of WLA people were on the flight. Audrey Peterson was among them, and I was soon talking

with someone who had not only heard of Vardis Fisher but knew my book on him! And so it continued in Durango, where at the convention hotel Jack Schaefer himself was one of the Western voices making me and others feel at home, part of a fellowship as well as a professional organization. Like other newcomers, I was meeting people who wished to see me again. The excitement of my first WLA meeting was such that already I was making plans to be present the next year in Bellingham. Helen Stauffer (Kearney is pronounced "Carney," she taught me) was also among the first-timers that year. She will remember how we all hated to see the meeting end. To embellish would be tedious, but I am sure that many here could also testify to the special qualities of first WLA meetings, to the good fellowship and the bonds that were made.

A quick check of the membership directory will confirm how successful the band of western scholars who founded the association have been in attracting easterners to the organization. Many of us have served on the Executive Committee of the organization, and after I had been in WLA for a few years, some folks began to suggest that it might even be appropriate to have a president from the East, pointing out that the location of the meeting need not be tied to the school of the president. With the growing number of easterners, some began to suggest that the Association might even wish to meet one year in the East. Hints of manifest destiny! In 1980, WLA went to the great river itself for its meeting. In 1983, George Day carried us to Minneapolis and St. Paul—Big Ten country, where the ghosts are those of Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, though Fred Manfred could have given us a tour of the upper regions of the Father of Waters.

When in 1989 members of the Executive Committee asked me to accept nomination as vice president of WLA, with presidency two years down the road, I thought it a good moment for me to say yes, to agree to the work that would, I hoped, say thank you to an organization that had been not only extraordinarily welcoming, but extraordinarily supportive of my work and had opened my eyes to new opportunities and new ways of seeing. Ann Ronald agreed to hold the 1992 meeting in Reno. Let me here renew my thanks to her and to her splendid colleagues at the University of Nevada-Reno for their partnership. I might have managed local arrangements by phone, or a quick visit, but I was glad that I didn't have to do that.

My election was the occasion for renewed discussion of the possibility for holding an annual meeting east of the Mississippi. There might, after all, be some point to our meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, let's say, Vardis Fisher had keenly identified with Thomas Wolfe because of the similarities of their mountain origins. Or we might have met in Boone, North Carolina, and had a major focus on re-imagining older notions of West.

When the Executive Committee talked about the possibility of some day meeting in the East, we agreed that my election was a good moment to go beyond cocktail-hour talk; to see what the membership as a whole might think about meeting in the East now and then. So we devised a questionnaire, and in bright purple so it couldn't be missed, it went to the membership.

For several weeks, the purple forms kept my mailbox full and enlivened my reading. One hundred thirty-seven members responded. That is a pretty strong survey response, I think. The responses that came after the deadline were less impassioned than those that came in the initial flurry and were often more thoughtful. There was, to

be sure, a good deal of passion from the most eager respondents. For some members, going east of the Mississippi for WLA would approach something like blasphemy; others would be extremely reluctant to go in that direction—for any purpose—I gathered. When their time comes, they want to die in the West—and with their boots on.

Noting the increasing percentage of members who live in the East and suggesting that holding some conference meetings in the East might equalize the burden of the greater travel expenses easterners face, the questionnaire asked members to agree or disagree with this statement: “WLA conferences should be held ONLY in the region of North America WEST of the Mississippi River (or its average longitude).” The form provided space for comments. Fifty-seven members agreed with the statement; seventy-six members disagreed. Four members (hating to be bound by statements with *only*) did not check but explained; they would fit in the disagree column. So count the vote 76 for policy that might permit an occasional meeting in the East and 57 against such policy. That’s a bigger margin than President Clinton got on his budget, but it is hardly a pressing mandate for change. Certainly it did not seem to me strong enough to recommend that the Executive Committee consider a policy for meeting in the East every fourth year, as some recommend. Most easterners like coming west very regularly, though they tend to approve the notion that it might be desirable for WLA to meet in the East, at least occasionally. Some Westerners eloquently argued the same position. The Chaucer Society, as one of you noted, does not meet only in England. Likewise, Western literature is not just for the West. Nor are all who write it western by every standard.

There are, of course, practical considerations in these matters. An advisory vote does not chart a course, as a national budget vote might. WLA does, after all, want a good attendance at its meetings. So does SMLA, which prides itself on being the largest of the regional MLAs. SMLA has its best attendance when the meeting is in Atlanta; so we meet there most often, currently in alternate years. Washington, DC, does well for SMLA, too. But a Florida site will cut down on attendance. It’s too far for too many people. Members in the Upper South tend to stay away. But SMLA continues to experiment. Next year SMLA meets in Baltimore, and probably Florida will get another chance in some distant year. Even now, the SMLA membership is voting on the proposition that all meetings be held in Atlanta.

The drama for MLA is similar. New York is a sure draw, but there was a falling-off, some of you know, when the meeting was held in Houston, and I make no prediction about Toronto. But come what may, MLA will survive! Count on it.

WLA will wish to be similarly pragmatic, but like MLA it should not be afraid to experiment. It is encouraging that October 1995 will find WLA meeting in Canada for the first time ever. We seem agreed, however, that the Association does not want to meet in big eastern or midwestern cities. It doesn’t want Cleveland, but it might like Boone. Some year, we might want to meet on the shores of Lake George in New York, one of the beautiful Wests of James Fenimore Cooper.

There would be no point in holding SMLA’s meeting in St. Louis, or in holding the Rocky Mountain MLA’s

meeting there. And although there are members in those organizations not from the defining regions, the organizations exist first to serve a region. The Western Literature Association, by contrast, is a national organization; it has increasingly become national in membership and in vision. Recognizing *West* as a fluid concept in American history, we study the literature of many Wests.

I draw back from any formulas or ratios for future meeting sites, but I hope we will continue to keep our options open. If we make a mistake some year, WLA will survive. The survey responses—with that majority favoring experimentation—strike me as worthy of inclusion in the WLA archives, and I submit them this day to Tom Lyon.

Whatever glitches or triumphs lie ahead, I am confident that we will continue to be a noticeably welcoming and inclusive organization. “Roll on, WLA, roll on!” This eastern dude salutes you and cheers you on to even greater achievement.