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# Ideology of Land Ownership: Homesteading Practice and Frontier Narratives of Glynn Bennion

I've lived most of my life in the West, specifically Utah. My ancestors have ranched and farmed in the southern end of Rush Valley, Utah, for five generations, soon to be six. Each generation has had attitudes toward acquiring private land and using communal land that are consistent with those of their forebears but which were also varied because of changed economic, political, and environmental circumstances. My grandfather, Glynn Sharp Bennion (1892–1972), was a twentieth-century homesteader and a western essayist and fiction writer, and looking into his life and writing provides a window into contemporary, conservative attitudes toward land use in Utah and elsewhere in the West. With the continuing controversy over designation of national monuments and federal ownership of large amounts of land in Utah, understanding these attitudes might be useful in negotiating the future of land-use policy.

Of course, a group of people inhabited this landscape prior to my family entering the valley. Before the Europeans took over, the Goshutes had no concept of personal ownership of land. Families of Chief Green Jacket used the southern end of Rush Valley as a base and moved seasonally within that space to gather enough food to subsist. Theirs was a simple system, not only one that is easy to distort with nostalgia but also one that was stable for thousands of years. Even though Europeans have long traditions of the commons, our ideology of land use is radically different, involving various ways, historically,

of owning and transferring land. Another difference is that public lands today, especially under a policy of multiple use, have so many stakeholders—ranchers, state and federal legislators, hunters, All Terrain Vehicle riders, hikers and outdoor enthusiasts, rock hunters, biologists, people living off tourism, and others—that it sometimes seems that there can be no common basis for understanding or cooperation.

However various their visions are, all these groups find western landscapes essential, and their attitudes can generally be traced to ideas about arid lands that coalesced in the mid-twentieth century—that they are to be enjoyed esthetically or valued ecologically or that they are a resource to be used. To understand western ranchers like my grandfather, the last concept is most significant. Even though he lived in the twentieth century, my grandfather was influenced, as were the first European settlers of North America, by the idea of open frontier, the conviction that there would always be more land and further opportunity—in my grandfather's case, through homesteading of arid land. Modern interpreters of the Turner Thesis have noted that the presence of a frontier was only one of many influences on the mentality of European North Americans.<sup>1</sup>

One category of pioneers, the Mormon immigrants, while conditioned by the availability of open land they could lay claim to, were also profoundly affected by their communalism and by values that came with them from Europe and other places.

To understand my grandfather, I have studied the attitudes of his forbears. My great-great-grandfather rented twelve acres of poor land in Wales. When his son, my great-great grandfather John, arrived in the West with other Mormons in the late 1840s, he wrote to his father with wonder of the availability of open land: "Every man has as much land set off to him as he wants or can cultivate" (Rogers 105). He thought of himself as subject to no despotic social or political system, but his ownership was under the authority of church leaders. After first settling near present-day Pioneer Park in Salt Lake City, John and his brother obeyed Brigham Young and moved across the Jordan River when their previous land was needed for a church farm (Bennion, Hardin 40).

The Mormons' settlement was initially outside the United States, but the Mexican–American War, specifically the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, made the land they had settled part of the United States. However, Mormons couldn't own their land according to federal law until the Land Office opened in 1869 (Utah.gov). Only then could settlers follow a process to gain legal title to the land they had settled on and had considered their own by making an entry, conducting a survey, and requesting the office to issue a certificate. This

integrated Utah with the National Land System. The Homestead Act (1862) and the Desert Lands Act (1877) created other processes for the transfer of unclaimed land to private ownership. Early in the history of Utah, my ancestors and other ranchers could also run their cattle on common range, but after the cattle ate spring growth for several years in a row, the perennial grass died out and, decades later, the federal government stepped in. According to family tradition, in the 1930s my great grandfather Israel worked with the feds to have unclaimed land protected as part of the Taylor Grazing Act (1934). He saw that open access to the range had depleted it and that certain wealthy Mormons were crowding out their poorer neighbors, even though this land had been used in common by communities.

My grandfather, Glynn, was a representative rancher, with ideology influenced by both his grandfather's desire for large herds and his father's more moderate management style. He undertook seven different ranching operations, acquiring the land through inheritance, homesteading, purchase, or rent; his last ranch was a twentieth-century homesteading operation. He is proof that the frontier mindset of the pioneers and their descendants didn't disappear when the frontier disappeared.

### Personal History

In 1917 my grandfather, Glynn, married Lucile Cannon (1891–1966), daughter of a successful orchard grower from the east bench of Salt Lake Valley. My uncle Robert said that they spent their wedding night in a granary on Israel's ranch, named Greenjacket after the Goshute chief. They spread blankets across the wheat—not what she was used to. At first they lived in the Forest Dale Ward in Salt Lake City. My grandfather wrote historical articles and fiction for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Improvement Era*, the *Westerner*, and other magazines on a variety of subjects connected to the West, such as Indians, ranching, the Mormon pioneers, and prospecting. Titles include “An Ill Wind,” “Ghost River,” “The Return of Bill Black,” “The Last Warrior of Breen's Hole,” “Mahsoquop,” and “Brigham Young and Jim Bridger.” Frontier values worked as themes in his writing. The people he wrote about treasured straight dealing over legalistic trickery and rural life over urban, as well as independence, self-sufficiency, and private ownership of land and resources, primarily through making claims.

During these years, the growth Glynn evidenced as a writer pleased my grandmother. In a letter to my father on his mission, Lucile wrote:

Your father has just completed a very excellent article on Brigham Young and Jim Bridger... It really is very,

very fine. He is all the time gaining in ability to see, to analyse and to express with conviction the wonderful things he finds in the files of the Historian's Office. I feel too that he has gained this winter a new view of Brigham Young's work which will be helpful to him, to us and to others who read his findings. (Letter, 21 March 1940)

Perhaps her desire was that my grandfather would grow to be an important man in the LDS Church, such as his grandfather John, who was a captain in the militia and a leader in the church, or his father, Israel, who was a bishop and a patriarch. But she was sensitive enough to see that he had a quality that allowed him to escape both the good and evil of such ambition: "Your father is not like many men who like to exercise their authority. But he has all the qualities of a leader of the first rank and, if each of us follows his quiet, unassuming leadership we will have much happiness together."

Unfortunately for her, he finally became unable to bear living in the city, partly because he disagreed with his supervisor's view of history. Joseph Fielding Smith, who was the LDS Church Historian from 1921 to 1970, believed church history is solely for the purpose of building faith and should have a positive spin. My grandfather, Glynn, was disturbed by the accounts of leaders who used their power to take advantage of impoverished immigrants. When Glynn discovered negative stories and reported them to the church historian, the source documents disappeared from the archives. This violated his system of ethics, inherited from his country-living father and mother, which taught that one should deal honestly and openly with other people, never hiding the truth.

Besides being frustrated by his city job, the money he earned from writing was not enough to support his family. Glynn's brothers left ranching to take up occupations in the city; Howard became CEO of Edison Electric, Mervyn became a naval ship captain, and Kenneth became a prominent educator. My uncle has described his father's discouragement: "Dad wanted to make it big, and being a writer, and a flunky to the [church] historian was not buying groceries for his family" (Bennion, Robert).

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore and left the city, returning to the high, arid landscapes of his youth, where he felt more at home. However, trying to be a rancher and a farmer in an arid land was hard labor and fraught with hazard. On an early property west of Vernon, Utah, the only town in southern Rush Valley, he planted a field of dry-farm wheat. It promised to be a good crop, but one day, not long before

harvest, he saw a huge black cloud the shape of an anvil moving across the flat toward his wheat. He knew immediately that his crop would be ruined: hail beat the stalks to the ground.

His next endeavor was to buy calves from ranchers in Delta and put them on the Faust Ranch, north of Vernon near where the Pony Express Station had stood half a century earlier. He borrowed money to buy feed for the steers. When they were grown out, the bankers in Tooele, whom he had trusted, repossessed the cattle, saying he had paid them nothing. He had paid them, but he never thought to ask for receipts. He had to go to work on the railroad to pay back the Delta ranchers for the calves advanced to him.

Glynn next worked on his father's farm at Greenjacket, but he wanted to expand his possibilities, so he looked westward. He had the pioneering impulse, wanting, like his father and grandfather, to make the desert blossom. In 1934 he homesteaded the foothills and dry valleys below Indian Springs, which he claimed with three of his sons. The oldest, my father, Colin, was seventeen years of age at the time. The springs are two miles from the homestead. To get the water to the field, my grandfather walked with a hoe dragging behind him. Then the boys followed, digging and guiding the water, pulling it along where their father led. I've walked this ditch, seen its wide, smooth curves. It has exactly the right slope to carry the water. If he had descended too rapidly, he wouldn't have had the elevation to carry water around the ridges. My uncle Robert believes my grandfather did it by looking at the number of ripples in the small stream behind him.

While part of the family was out at Indian Springs, Lucile and the two youngest children stayed in Salt Lake City. In one letter, dated 8 November 1943 and written to Lucile from Indian Creek, my grandfather wrote first of the extreme difficulty he had keeping sheep off his alfalfa. He must have been responding to a letter from her that chided him for not writing more and possibly for not coming back to the city. But for him, life in the city was much worse than backbreaking work in the desert because he owned the land and that made him feel independent. Near the end of the letter he wrote,

When I think of the wretched, hopeless misery of the last few years in town, of being constantly reminded and twitted about my failures, of being tacitly regarded and fenced against as a bum, and the miserable little jobs handed me—as charity, and contrast it with the peace of the desert, the happiness of a new hope, and the joy of perfect health and hard, clean work, I realize that I can't and won't go back. And I've worked too hard

this summer to throw it away and go back to the hell of the city. (8 November 1943)

His in-laws and brothers didn't see the desert with the same vision, and as a result, they decided to live in the city where they could make more money for their families.

A decade after settling Indian Springs, my grandfather rented the James Ranch, just over the mountain from Indian Springs. My uncle Robert told me that Glynn lost that place after partners cheated him, but Robert didn't share the details. He also told me that much of Glynn's herd died in the harsh winter of 1948–49. As the snow deepened, the cattle climbed onto the carcasses of the first dead; in spring, Glynn found pyramids of frozen carcasses.

After these failures, his father and his brothers urged him to leave the futile enterprise of ranching where there was little water. The year before his death, Israel, Glynn's father, wrote that he was impressed with Glynn's "attitude and prospects" and noted that there are "opportunities in any and every direction," but these opportunities resulted in "confusion and crowding in every direction." At the end of the note, he wrote about "the joy there is in the spaces around 'out west'" (10 October 1943). This rambling and disjointed letter, written when Israel's mind was not as sharp as it once was, is a compound of opposites: a warning against the hazard of homesteading and of agriculture in general and an appreciation of the adventure and of the feeling of an expansive western landscape, full of possibility.

Glynn's brother, Howard, in a letter dated 8 March 1952, was much more cogent and critical. He chastised Glynn for pursuing a farm and ranch in Riverbed. Howard starts by commenting on the letter Glynn sent him 21 February of the same year: "It is a record of hard struggle without commensurate profit." Despite high prices, presumably for alfalfa hay and beef calves, Howard says that Glynn's

profits have gone into fences and ditches and planting of fields and these hard won assets are of uncertain value because in that area fields go back to sagebrush so easily, ditches wash in to gulches and fences may not be used long. It has been that way ever since I can remember and the countryside is scarred with the remains of valiant efforts to make a home or a field. It is the picture of sub-marginal land—not quite profitable to work. Tempting, but not good enough.

Then Howard talks specifically about Glynn's newest homestead, writing, "In my opinion your proposed Riverbed enterprise is ill advised at

your time of life. It is another example of your brushing prudence to one side in order to get on with something you want to do. You should instead take the conservative course now and try to cash in more on your existing assets." He suggests that Glynn is making a grave mistake that will affect the next generation: "You paint glowing pictures and have done so for years and lure your boys to want to go into desert ranching. It prevents them from focusing on what they might better be doing elsewhere and striking out while young enough to make a place for themselves and earn a livelihood for their families. They start and stop and mill around." The letter ends, "You need to change your attitude sharply and reorient your course."

I can find no response to his brother's letter in my grandfather's papers, but Glynn remained on the Riverbed Ranch, where he had homesteaded on an ancient riverbed that had long ago connected two lobes of Lake Bonneville. Drilling on the land Glynn found good water not far underground, and he began homesteading. Not satisfied with the 160 acres that he had right to in his own name, he had each of his sons and their wives file for plots of land—not just with this farm but with others as he moved westward to where land was not privately owned. He acted in response to an imagined frontier, following the lure of open land described by the Turner thesis, which as Brian Cannon observes in *Reopening the Frontier: Homesteading in the Modern West*, articulates an essential element of our national myth (3). This myth pulled my grandfather forward despite the disapproval of my grandmother and his brothers. It shaped his responses, translating what could be seen as economic failure into feelings of personal freedom. His wife and his family came to view ranching through urban eyes, as did many others. Cannon writes that most of the people moving to the West after WWII came for jobs in urban areas, not for agriculture (4). They saw the West as a nonproductive landscape, valuable only for recreation and aesthetic pleasure. Others came to believe that the arid lands should be protected more than used (6). Glynn's family demonstrated these attitudes as they urged him to leave his inefficient efforts to farm the desert and return to the city, where he could make more money. However, Glynn persevered until finally, long after some might have given up, he established a somewhat profitable farm and ranch on the land he and his children had homesteaded at Riverbed.

### Homesteading

In 1962, anticipating the centenary of the Homestead Act signed by President Lincoln, a feature writer for the *Salt Lake Tribune*,

Lyle E. Colbath, and a photographer drove west across bad roads through apparently desolate country in order to interview Glynn, who was seventy years of age at the time. Colbath describes his surprise when he first saw Glynn's farm spread before him:

Then, rounding the last mountain point, the valley before us was unbelievable—a rich green spectacle, with rows of bailed [*sic*] hay stretching into the distance, green fields of alfalfa, corrals of fine fat livestock, a yard of modern, well-kept farm machinery, and ditches flowing with clear water. (6)

In Colbath's article, Glynn praises the Homestead Act, which provided the way for people with average income to realize the dream of getting and holding land, which had been the dream of his grandfather John, the Mormon pioneer. His statements to Colbath show that he has inherited the old values:

Pioneer spirit for homesteading, adventure, hard work and realizing one's dreams, regardless of age, was once an important part of our American life. People of today just cannot be convinced that there are thousands of acres of unappropriated land in the great valleys of the West Desert, potentially rich and productive with ample underground water for irrigation.

These lands are going to waste because homesteading is generally considered to be for poor people and then only of necessity. . . . [To] make a success of a homestead nowadays requires money, credit, courage, a quality of imagination that can make a mirage actually become a garden of Eden. (6)

Colbath wrote that between 1863 and 1962 there had been 1,621,569 entries claiming 270,160,714 acres of public land, but in 1960 there were only 300 new entries (7). Glynn told the reporter that when his father, Israel, homesteaded, the cost of proving up (giving evidence of residence and improvements) on the land was about \$500, but, at the time of the interview, he estimated the cost of bringing 160 acres into production to be \$35,000. His farm, which he co-owned with his son George, produced, in 1962, 1,000 tons of alfalfa hay.

In the article, Glynn talks of the ideology behind homesteading:

I believe homesteading had more to do with the fabulous inland development of this country during the later part of the 19th century than any factor in our national



growth. No rich investor could secure great tracts of land and operate with tenants or hirelings like European lords.

I think the rigors of the long dangerous wagon train journeys taught home-seekers a lot about self-government, self-reliance, and survival techniques. Above all, they learned the benefits of working together for the good of all. Braving destitution, these good souls were exultant that they were not only a part of the land, but the land was their very own. (7)

Glynn's Riverbed farm was one of three thousand opened between 1946 and 1966 through cooperation between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior. His homesteading was a practical means of getting new land, but his use of the Homestead Act embodies his view of the world. The values of being lord of his own property that he received from his grandfather blended with values inherited from other early settlers of North America. As Cannon writes, "The history of postwar homesteading illustrates a significant ideological continuity: the myths of the frontier and Jeffersonian yeomanry, with their linkage of virtue, independence, and life on the land flourished long after 'free land' was no longer readily available" (4). Glynn and others found farming and ranching valuable for "personal fulfillment, material wealth, and family stability" (9).

As Cannon suggests, the ideal of free land was tied to other virtues, and people commonly believed that rural life was more "honest and moral" than city life. Farmers work harder than city people, and they live in a manner that enables them to be closer to their families (5). Cannon quotes Douglas Hurt as saying, "The Jeffersonian ideal died hard, if it died at all" (5). Because of the vision inherited from his grandfather, Glynn had reason to think of himself not as a mere Jeffersonian yeoman farmer but as a lord of his own estate.

### Frontier Values in his Writing

The virtues of straight talking and honest dealing that Glynn wrote about were precisely what made it difficult for him to work as a writer for the church historian's office, where he had externally imposed expectations and a supervisor he had to obey even when they disagreed. His writing not only embodies his frontier or homesteading values but also shows his ideology of restraint or control when exercising these values.

"Old Boone," published in 1929, is a good example of how he manifested his ideology in the form of narrative. The article, which seems to

be a blend of fact and fiction, describes the later life of Bill Arps, a “typical frontiersman—he lived off the raw resources of the wilderness like an Indian, and knew little if anything about God or women” (6). In his old age, Arps discovers a box valley with a stream running through it, where he and his dog settle. He builds a corral and a rock cabin, and he plants a garden. Wild horses come to the water, and he plans to trap, train, and sell them for his living. But then his luck turns south. Cougars move in and kill his horses, and a human couple, the Blatts, ask if they can settle on the stream above him, apparently so that the husband can heal in the clear, dry air from miner’s consumption. Having been raised to be hospitable, Arps agrees. The couple gradually appropriate more and more resources from the little valley, first burning the wood from the corrals and then taking so much water that Arps’s garden won’t grow. Eventually, the couple announce that they have used a legal technicality to file on the property and water, and they give Arps a letter commanding him to move out. Hopeless, and needing to distract himself from his desire to shoot Mr. Blatt, he tramps in the hills with his rifle and Old Boone, an excellent hunting dog. Old Boone starts on the track of a cougar. Eventually, man and dog discover Arps’s last horse, mostly eaten by the cougars. Arps complains that his string of bad luck has gone long enough, that he has sunk as low as he can. But then his fortunes turn. That day, he and Old Boone track down and kill four cougars, whose pelts he can sell for food. In the evening, Old Boone continues to follow the scent of a fifth cougar. As Arps sleeps his last night in his cabin, Old Boone chases the cougar down into the valley and onto the roof of the Blatts’s cabin. The cougar leaps through the window, smashes the lantern onto the stove, and the whole cabin burns. Still holding to the frontier value of hospitality, Arps opens his cabin to the Blatts. The next day Arps and Boone follow the tracks of the last cougar and are ambushed by the animal. Old Boone saves Arps’s life and together they kill the cougar. As Arps looks around, he sees color in the rocks, in an outcropping that appears again and again across the property, so he stakes a claim. He’s richer by five pelts, which he can sell for food. The Blatts, who wanted to cheat him, are remorseful and tell him he doesn’t have to leave, even though they have legal title to his valley. He shares the claim and they all become rich.

This sentimental story contains many values that my grandfather shared with other westerners, especially homesteaders. It was published in 1929 in the *Westerner*, a magazine that contained nostalgic stories about the frontier, cattlemen, and settlers. The story is set near my grandfather’s Indian Springs property. The protagonist, Bill Arps, possesses certain values—self-sufficiency, independence, love of isolation

and the fringe of the frontier, hospitality, equanimity concerning fate—or taking fortune as it comes—while still possessing the desire to strike it rich, and ignorance of the conventions of civilization, especially the law. The antagonists in the story are also traditional—mountain lions, the squatters who abused his hospitality, and the legal statutes that would support their thievery of his land. The issues are the whimsical nature of fate; competition for resources of land, water, wild horses, and minerals; the marked difference between desert and urban ethics; and the idea that a genuine westerner can always find another pristine valley with a stream flowing through it. Dishonest people use the law to cheat others, but desert people don't attend much to legality. Violence is a potential solution to disagreements. The story also considers more minor but connected values—the devotion of dogs, accuracy with a gun, and distaste for overbearing women.

In "Grantsville," Glynn describes the settlers who came to Grantsville in 1855 as engaged in "a primitive struggle with the wilderness" (1). He writes that these impoverished people, who by 1855 had built only small, cramped huts, wouldn't allow their struggle to cramp their spirits. They show the "pioneering genius of the Anglo-Saxon race" (1). Because grasshoppers had decimated their early crops, they survived by "subsisting on Greasewood tops and pigweed greens" (2). That spring, when one man was given a sack of flour, "he fell down and cried like a child for joy" (2). The settlers of Grantsville embodied the "heroic foundation-laying of a community—a fine example of democratic colonization" (1). He contrasts their sacrifice and industry to the local Indians who survived on thievery and begging: "All of them displayed the distinctively Indian characteristics of anarchy, superstition and improvidence" (3). While later he wrote articles more sympathetic to American Indians, this attitude reflected those of the colonizers themselves, who didn't understand their native neighbors. In fact my grandfather, in a later article, "One Indian's Vengeance," used the example of the Native Americans' lack of possessiveness to contrast the avarice of the Anglos: "The disease of avarice—the insatiable greed for gold and for land; the intense egotism radiating authority and possession; the queer hypocrisies or inconsistencies responsible for the astonishing breach between preachment and practice—these were some of the white man's quirks which the Indian could not understand" (92). Glynn's critical gaze toward those whose greed for land overthrew their common sense also fell on members of his own family.

In "A Pioneer Cattle Venture of the Bennion Family," published in 1966, my grandfather describes his ancestors' role in a financial and ecological disaster. By 1855 Glynn's grandfather John's cattle, sheep, and horses had exhausted the common grazing land west of the Jordan

River where his home was, and he and his partners had to move their livestock operations to the southern end of Rush Valley, about 60 miles southwest. John followed the same pattern there, spreading his growing herds across the landscape and leaving them there during the spring growing period for native grasses. My grandfather is clearly bewildered by their use of the land: "One wonders why they allowed their livestock to so greatly increase at a time when there was little or no market for the increase" (315). What they gained was insignificant when compared to the value of the land they ruined. He admits that they were ignorant, having come from more humid climates. They had difficulty estimating the "carrying capacity" of the range. Despite his criticism of their land use, he admired their work ethic, will, and ability to sacrifice. Glynn's grandfather John's first wife, Esther Wainwright, was "a person of unusual physical and mental strength and possessed of a driving determination to transform by austerity and hard work the grinding privations of the pioneer years into solvency and plenty" (317).

Glynn makes it clear that this is the same drive that allowed the tragic destruction of the range—on both privately held land and the commons. More precisely, he shows that this drive—unaccompanied by the ability to estimate possibilities accurately, to make viable plans, and to exercise restraint—resulted in failure. Unlike first-generation ranchers, my grandfather showed a clear understanding of how the resources of the land could be damaged through overuse. The end of the Bennion cattle herds occurred when Glynn's father Israel took the two thousand cattle eastward to the San Rafael. The older Bennions left only the fifteen-year-old Israel and another worker to manage these herds in the ravines and canyons of that rough country. Three years after they entered the San Rafael Swell, Israel and his coworker emerged with only seventeen hundred animals, even though the cattle had birthed seven hundred calves a year (323–24). Israel knew that if they had kept working at gathering, they could have found perhaps a thousand more animals.

In his analysis of this misadventure, Glynn reveals his own values. One is that the sensitive and honest people in the world are often beaten by those who take advantage of others: "One of the most useful talents a successful man can acquire is the ability to make himself look good and make someone else look bad. My father was a gentle, deeply religious man, totally lacking in the strong assertiveness necessary [for] success in recrimination and angry debate" (324). He suggests an interpretation that his father never recognized, probably because of his kindness: "In my own mind the blame for the disaster must rest squarely on the older Bennions for leaving too much property to be

cared for by too few and inexperienced hands and in a place and situation altogether different from any they were acquainted with" (324–25). He concludes, "It is no wonder that boys, forced into manhood, were unequal to the situation" (325). Environmentalists often assume that ranchers are mere capitalists and will ruin the range if they can. For many ranchers like my grandfather, that is a distortion of his values.

These essays and stories show that Glynn valued clever initiative, independence, ownership of land, straight dealings with others, and determination to overcome obstacles. Many people still hold to these values and believe they are developed best by a rural and agricultural lifestyle, an environment where hard work results in strong ethical character; however, many people simply aren't willing to live that lifestyle. The values of ranchers in my grandfather's time have been passed to their children and grandchildren, and an examination of these values can shed light on the anger of those who participated in the Sage Brush Rebellion in the 1970s and 1980s, the Public Lands Initiative pushed by Representative Rob Bishop in 2016, the Transfer of Public Lands Act and the Utah Public Land Management Act passed by the Utah State Legislature in 2012 and 2016, respectively, Ken Ivory's American Lands Council established in 2012, and the rebellious acts of the Bundy family in 2014 and 2016.

### Modern Frontier Mentality

My sister, Elizabeth Mitchell, who has aggressively espoused the values of her father, grandfather, and other ancestors, currently operates the family ranch at Greenjacket with her husband. She is subject to federal agencies, mostly the United States Forest Service, in the management of grazing land that our father, grandfather, and great-grandfather used. She resents the idea, held by many environmentalists, that she is a destroyer of her own lands and of public lands. She chafes at the idea of federal land managers (people she refers to as her "landlords") being so changeable as the forest ranger and other supervisors are replaced and policies change. She told me that the current district administrator is sympathetic to ranchers, funding more land improvement projects—such as chaining of junipers, reseeding, fencing, and putting in water tanks—than the ranchers have time to take advantage of, but the ranger before him seemed to want to eliminate grazing and refused funding for most projects, especially for vegetative and insect treatments (Mitchell). My sister's inherited knowledge of what works and what doesn't is often ignored by a federal bureaucracy that has little specific knowledge of the land and values that are

sometimes foreign to her own. She and other ranchers are sometimes not consulted in making decisions, such as how long to leave cattle on a piece of land, where to place the water and salt to invite cattle toward mature grass they might otherwise neglect, what native and introduced plants work best. Admittedly the values of ranchers and land managers are different; land managers must consider all the stakeholders, including recreationists and environmentalists, while the ranchers are trying to raise cattle that they can sell, and see recreationists and environmentalists as impediments to their goals. While my sister doesn't suggest violence against the government agents, she empathizes with some who do.

In a Facebook post, dated 29 April 2014, LaVoy Finicum, who would die in January 2016 while helping Ammon Bundy seize a federal nature preserve in protest of federal overreach, demonstrates many of the values embodied in my grandfather's articles: unfamiliarity with the trappings of civilization, mistrust of the law and those who manipulate the law to deprive others, the natural rights of the first settler, and acceptance of violence as a natural way to solve problems. Finicum opens his post, "Thank you for your letter. I guess that is what they are called on facebook. My children are trying to drag me into the 21st century. I grew up without a phone or tv in our home. I am still more comfortable with writing with pen and paper and using stamps and envelopes." He clearly saw himself as a holdover from the past.

Finicum was a natural orator, and in his post, he effectively establishes his authority to speak to westerners about western issues. He knows little of modern values and sensibilities, a rejection of urban lifestyles that Cannon says was part of the modern homesteading myth: living on the land is a more moral life than living in the city. Finicum's next sentence reinforces the value of mistrust of those, like the Blatts in Glynn's story, who make their living manipulating the law. He writes, "I am no lawyer but I do know what is right and wrong." He then discusses how land was settled: "To share some general understanding on grazing rights you need to start with the first ranchers in the West. The first rancher to arrive in an area would claim the area his to ranch. A natural right or preemptive right was established." This was true in much of the West, but in Utah land, water and other resources were administered through both communal/ecclesiastical authority and preemption, so Finicum is only partially accurate. When the Mormons settled Utah, their leader, Brigham Young, said that only God could own timber and water and those resources should be held in common. Finicum then talks about the violence of this process as a natural part of it: "When another rancher showed up he respected the first rancher or there would be a bloody range war. There were many bloody range

wars. Eventually, most of the disputes settled down." His next rhetorical step is to discuss the Taylor Grazing Act (which ended most homesteading) and the Bureau of Land Management (which was set up to administer land that was not released to homesteaders). These legal and administrative entities he considers external to that earlier natural process: "The Taylor grazing act was never intended to grow into what the BLM has become." He is careful to distinguish between employees of the BLM, which include many good men, and the institution: "I do not feel the Feds should have their fingers on this land. It belongs to the states and the people." He distinguishes between the former federal employees who supported ranching and "the environmentalists who want no ranching." He writes that these environmentalists (who by implication are connected to city values and who view the desert aesthetically) have a lot of money and use the court system and governmental regulations to harass ranchers and original settlers. He finishes with the following: "The heavy arm of government is not only felt by the ranchers but by the farmers and so many industries in our country. . . . I desire that my country be free and you cannot have freedom without the control of property." After his death at the hands of federal agents, his arguments were given further authority for many western ranchers. The rhetoric is so self-consistent that it doesn't recognize either the long tradition of common land or the reality that farmers and ranchers have often historically overused and damaged both private and common land. The tragedy of the commons is that some ranchers, like my great-great-grandfather, damaged their own interest by over-exploiting what seemed to be an endless resource, a complex grass colony that had developed over centuries and that native peoples used without damaging.

What my sister has in common with the Bundys and Finicum is the inheritance of pioneer values and the view of western ranchers and farmers as proper stewards of the land, including land that could be viewed as commons. These values are also proclaimed in a self-published picture book created by my wife's uncle, Roger Chamberlain, and Chad Winn, who was leader of the Mormon congregation I attended in the early eighties. They can in no way be construed as radicals like Finicum, but they have a philosophical sympathy with him. Chamberlain and Winn found similar interests and values in farming in the West and decided to write a book together. The dedication by the author, Winn, reads as follows: "I dedicated this poem to my wife, Vernice, and our family who have all done their part to keep our little ranch running. And to all who sacrifice their energy, time, and even off-farm money to stay on the land."

The first part of the story presents an argument. On the first page is a picture of an overweight man with his hand out. He's wearing a tie with the letters *U-S-A* on it. Opposite is a farmer wearing overalls and holding a shovel. The text reads:

This story starts with a statement that I believe is not always true.  
 "I'm with the Government and I'm here to help you."  
 When it comes to child labor laws it surely proves that true.

The next two pages show young people working—moving sprinkler pipes, setting a fence post. The text complains that "They" (maybe government regulators, maybe politicians and city people) try to keep farm children under sixteen years of age from working because of the danger. The following pages show young people in the city recreating while the adults work. The kids are watching TV, playing video games, texting friends, and hanging out. The poem says that these young people are missing out on the satisfaction that comes from learning and doing: "It is a blessing for a child to plow the land, and turn over the sod. To plant the seeds and watch them grow, it is a gift from God."

The second half of the book presents aesthetic and practical evidence. It shows farmers and ranchers doing what the author and the illustrator clearly view as pleasurable and rewarding work: plowing, harvesting hay and grain, and managing cattle. Working the land, according to these two men, teaches values of responsibility and industry to young people. This work teaches them independence, stewardship, and mistrust of the government. Aesthetic pleasure in the natural world is not disconnected from stewardship and use, according to this book. The author describes the pleasure of watching calves born, watching them "run and play," of watching foals "spin and go." The one picture devoted to recreation instead of work shows kids standing in the back of a pickup with a rack on it. Their father is driving along a mountain road, which is crowded with conifers, deciduous trees, and deer and other wild animals. Toward the end, Winn writes, "Working side by side with mom and dad is a blessing every day," "producing food is an old and honorable profession," and "Ecclesiastes tells us, 'The sleep of a laboring man is sweet.'"

Chamberlain's line drawings demonstrate his love for and focus on the ranching lifestyle, not just through their subject material but also through their detail. For example, one picture is of a young man training a horse in a circular corral with a long lead. He holds a whip in his right hand and is training the horse to obey signals. At his feet are some objects used by trainers to help a young horse become acquainted with surprises—a burlap sack, a string of tin cans, and a newspaper. His drawings include barbed-wire and pole fences, small shacks, a



lone tree, mountains in the distance, narrow streams of water, desert plants such as sagebrush and scrub oak, bales of hay, and livestock. All these details exhibit Chamberlain's knowledge of and love for ranching.

While the book presents an argument, it is more expressive than persuasive—designed more as a manifesto on the benefits of the ranching life than something that would persuade government to change regulations. The text itself implies no clear audience; it could be read to children, but I suspect its primary reader would be other insiders to the philosophy of rural living—those who are already persuaded. This kind of expressive discourse is familiar to Mormon ranchers, who in church have the opportunity once a month to give witness or bear testimony concerning their religion—“This I know.” Not only the writers of this picture book, but also Finicum and the Bundys have Mormon heritage. So it's a form that may partially structure their response to politics and governmental regulation. Their testimonies aren't open to persuasion. Their manifestos have the rhetorical form of innate knowledge. This causes difficulty in communication with those who don't have their values.

A spokesman for common understanding between environmentalists and ranchers might be Wendel Berry, a non-westerner. In “A Defense of the Family Farm,” he writes that the multigenerational farm results in proper care for the land. “This is the value of longevity in landholding: In the long term, knowledge and affection accumulate, and, in the long term, knowledge and affection pay” (165). He ties this ability to own land to democracy: “Shall the usable property of our country be divided democratically, or not? If many people do not own the usable property, then they must submit to the few who do own it” (165). This ownership, he writes, gives dignity to work, because “the small farm of a good farmer . . . gives work a quality and a dignity” (165). He then describes this work as spiritual: “The small family farm is one of the last places . . . where men and women (and girls and boys, too) can answer that call to be an artist, to learn to give love to the work of their hands” (166–67). This making of crops, of working on every stage of that making, is a “spiritual value” but one that is also practical. The family farm gives, both to the farm family and to the nation, “the means of life, the goodness of food, and the longevity and dependability of the sources of food, both natural and cultural. The proper answer to the spiritual calling becomes, in turn, the proper fulfillment of physical need” (167).

If they read Berry's essays, my grandfather, sister, and other western ranchers would resonate with Berry's romanticized ideal. However, managing a small parcel of private land with a few cattle is

quite different from grazing hundreds of cattle on land owned by the federal government and not by the rancher herself. Also, Berry's idealism about the native knowledge of those who live on and work the land perhaps underplays abuses and mistakes that many farmers and their ancestors perpetrated on their way to better knowledge. In the arid west, such mistakes can endure for generations. So the management of federal land is a complex and fraught issue.

Beginning during my grandfather's life, as Cannon writes, interest in public lands centered on recreation and aesthetics, but the informal pieces of writing I've described show that there is still a strong strain in many westerners who embrace the myth of the frontier, the value of owning land, being independent, and working one's own land. The conflict comes when ranchers apply these values to common land that is managed by federal agencies that follow a multiuse policy. Even though these ranchers don't own the land, it is easy for them to remember when it was commons during their ancestors' lives, when there seemed to be no regulation. It's easy to romanticize those times and forget the destruction wrought by ignorance or even greed. This is especially true on land that was once in Utah Territory, managed by ecclesiastical leaders. When city-dwelling environmentalists and ecologically trained government officials try to dictate ideas and practices to ranchers on land that their families have used for generations and that appear to contradict these bone-deep values, the words fall on stony ears. It's easy for ranchers like my sister to identify, even if I don't, with Cliven Bundy, whose federal allotments were condemned in order to protect the desert tortoise and who has refused to pay penalty fees and has resisted the BLM removal of his cattle. A first step in the kind of compromise that existed during my father Colin's time between him and government officials, whom I knew as his friends, might be to find common ground in the desire to preserve the resources of the land. In Utah, ranchers, government officials, recreationists including hunters, and environmentalists have worked together in many instances, such as their united efforts to preserve the habitat of sage grouse. I believe that with mutual respect and a hesitancy to manage policy through litigation, such conversations could be held.

Most people in the West don't agree with the violence used by some to force the federal government to turn control of federal lands to the ranchers who run their cattle on them. Many don't think that the states would be better managers. Many recognize that some ranchers have worn out the land. But many still chafe at governmental control and policies invented by someone who works on the opposite side of the continent, in Washington D. C. I have a foot in both camps; I am of rancher stock, but I am an environmentalist and a believer in the value

of protected public lands. I also believe that we could learn much from both the balanced use of the land by Goshutes and the restrained practice of some Mormon settlers and current-day ranchers—like my great-grandfather and my sister—who know the value of the commons and who believe that they should be careful stewards, avoiding excessive practice. From my perspective, both ranchers and the feds need to discover ways of working together and sharing responsibility. As all of us in the West try to design a future where environmentalists, ranchers, government officials, recreationists, and others might live compatibly, it may serve us all to become familiar with the mythos, antiquated as it may seem to some, that drove and continues to drive western ranchers.

## NOTE

1. Some of the many interpretations of the Turner Thesis can be found in Kolodny; Limerick; Malone and Etulain; Smith; White; White, Limerick, and Grossman; and Worster.

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