

The Unwritten West

Broadening the scopes of stories

By Win Blevins

At one of my first WWA conventions, a guy put me in a pickle. Representing a *super-selling* series of Western books, he offered me big bucks to write one of the next entries.

The good part of the deal was that the advance would be \$50,000 – I'd never seen the likes of that – and he said no writer for the series had ever earned less than \$100,000 on one of their books. Good bait.

The rest of the deal was to write in the series style. He handed me some papers and said, "Look at these tonight and let me know tomorrow if you want in."

Which led to a painful evening.

The first set of papers told what kind of man the protagonist had to be. Eyes either gunmetal gray or gunmetal blue. Shoulders as wide as an axe handle. A right guy with the courage of a mountain cat. Carries a Colt .45, nothing else, and his long gun is a lever-action Winchester '73, "the gun that won the West," nothing else.

Paint by numbers, I thought.

The next set was a chapter-by-chapter outline, telling me what had to happen when in every book of the series.

They had it down to a formula, and the formula obviously worked. It seemed based on the Westerns we saw in darkened theaters on Saturday afternoon when we were kids.

Might be good to write, if I wanted a road heavily traveled.

A bad night followed by a lousy morning when I handed him the papers and shook my head no.

This decision was not virtue on my part, not at all. I didn't think I could do it. Go to work every morning to put stereotypical characters through actions determined by someone who thought like a machine? No surprises, no discoveries, no fun?

I thought I'd go crazy and throw a brick at my computer screen.

That afternoon I walked through the Western sections of a Walmart and

two supermarkets. That fellow's series dominated. And the pages I skimmed of the other books indicated that they were much the same.

I wanted to scream, "How can you tell the same story over and over and not die of boredom?"

The bigger question was, "Why did I throw myself into a genre where this is the road to success?"

I loved the West. I was infatuated with its stories. Grand plans, great efforts, huge successes and failures. But ...

OK, big decision. I'll set out on a full summer of driving around, looking for the stories I want to tell.

Here, the summit of South Pass, is where Jedediah Smith stood and became the first American to see the interior West. Also, a generation later, where Willie Company, a Mormon handcart train, got into winter weather and lots of people died.

This next place is where John Chivington's troops sneaked up on Black Kettle's peaceful camp at night and slaughtered women and children.

This is where John Wesley Powell rowed his expedition on the first exploration of Glen Canyon, with rapids so devilish that some of the men quit and ran away.

This is where Crazy Horse kicked George Custer's tail. (And that story

had been told, told and retold, seemingly always from Custer's point of view. But who kicked whose tail here, and why?)

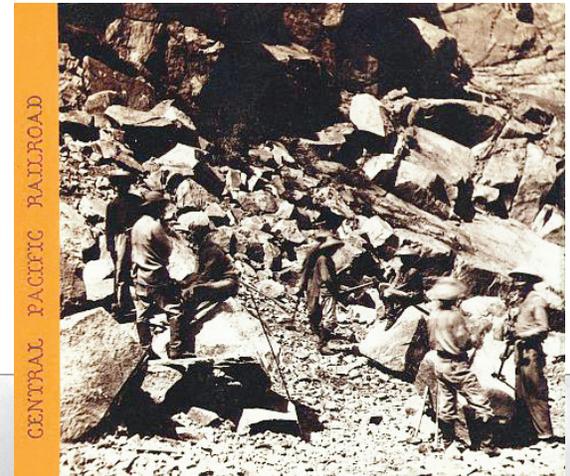
This is where Lewis and Clark first saw the western sea, and smiled in triumph.

Of course, I knew there was an alternative – I'd read the great ones, Steinbeck, DeVoto, Stegner, Guthrie, Lavender and their brethren.



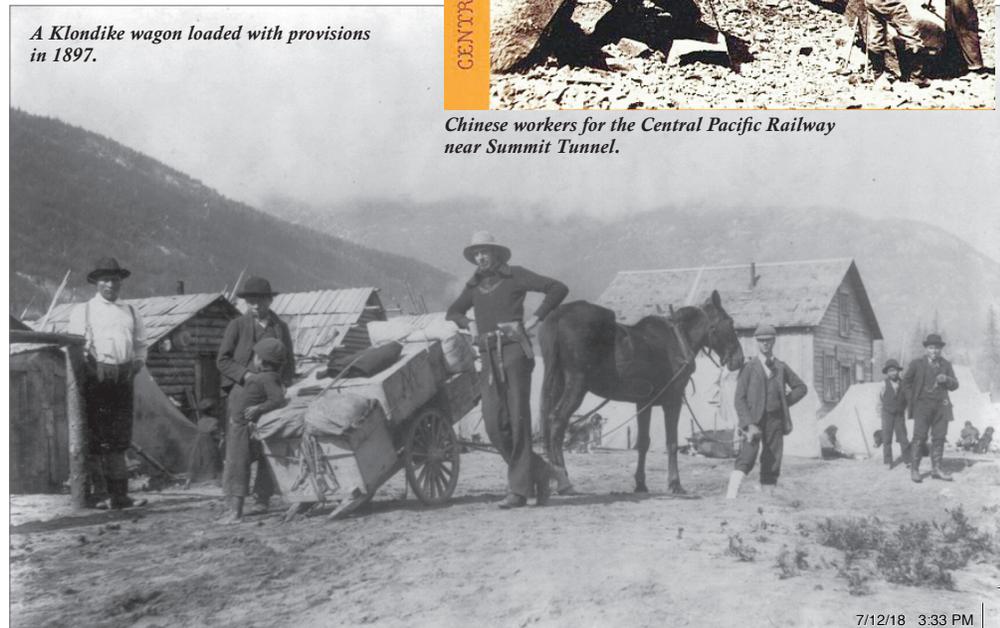
One of Alfred Jacob Miller's murals (inside the Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park) depicting trappers and mountain men.

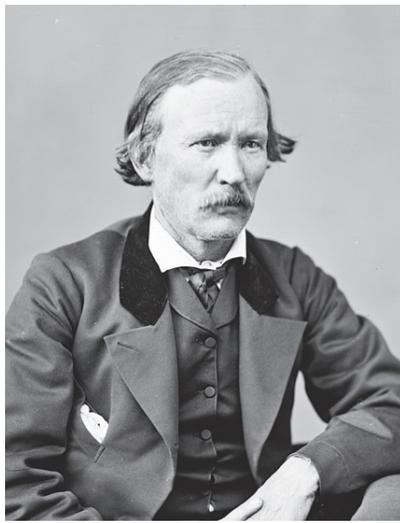
All photographs from the Library of Congress



Chinese workers for the Central Pacific Railway near Summit Tunnel.

A Klondike wagon loaded with provisions in 1897.





Kit Carson

But those were the books that got good reviews and prizes. Sometimes they *sold*, but clearly the formula book was a more certain road.

On the long drive home I got it sorted out. There was a West of paths walked by most writers, again and again. Dozens of books about Custer and almost none about Crazy Horse. The Nth tome claiming to be “the last word about Billy the Kid.” And yet another run-through of Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and the O.K. Corral.

But there is another West. Since the day of that long, long drive I have called it the unwritten West.

It is far bigger than the West that has been written and rewritten and written. It is much more surprising, more various in its peoples, and more ripe with insights into what really happened in our grand West.

Yes, I’ve written a stack of books about it and am passionate to keep rolling. The unwritten West looks like this:

Indians. The most fertile ground for research and Western storytelling. Indian cultures vary widely, from the

nomadic, buffalo-hunting tribes of the mountains and plains to the pueblo people of canyon country to the fishermen of the Northwest to the Eskimos of Alaska to the wildly various *Indios* of California. Not enough Native writers have written the core truths about their own ways of life, and not enough of the rest of us have taken on the challenge of looking at the conquering of the West through the eyes of the “conquered.” Nothing is more challenging than learning a Native culture well enough to tell a story from their point of view. And nothing is more fascinating.

Mountain men. For some virtues we hold high – rugged individualism, self-reliance, courage, daring – these trailblazers beat all. Yet they’ve barely touched the mass consciousness.

The trappers and fur traders headed out from St. Louis and discovered every nook and cranny, crick and canyon of the West, from Puget Sound to the long road to Mexico City. The Pathfinder wasn’t Fremont. It was the mountain men who guided him over ground they had ridden for 20 years, mainly Kit Carson and Tom Fitzpatrick.

They also succeeded where their successors in the West failed – they learned to live with the Indians. They married into the tribes, learned the languages, sired red children, integrated themselves thoroughly. Had the Army listened to Fitzpatrick, there would have been no Indian wars and no Custer disaster.

A writer looking for heroism in the West should start here.

French-Canadian trappers and traders. The Canadians are even less known

than the guys we call the mountain men. They explored the West earlier than their American counterparts and roamed into an even more dangerous country, from Montreal to the Arctic Ocean. Yes, the Arctic Ocean. Heroes aplenty.

Californios. There was a prosperous class of people in California before Americans arrived, the ranchers of that province of Mexico. They profited from grass so thick and tall a rider had to stand on his saddle to see over it. Ignored by their government in Mexico City, they welcomed Americans. Where are the histories, biographies, and novels about these people?

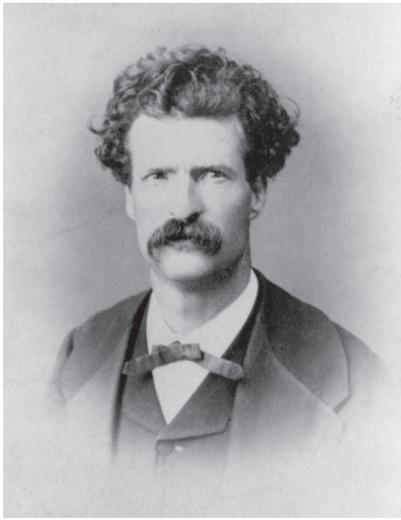
Comically, the first man to start a newspaper in California nearly went broke before he figured out that he had to print it in Spanish and English. The *Californios* were educated, but the first Americans in the Golden State, mostly mountain men, were largely illiterate.

Mormons. These people, controversial as they were and are, have fought hard and achieved a lot. Their emigrations yield heroic tales, and they showed the grit to succeed in colonizing an arid and alien land. If writers avoid getting trapped into arguing either for or against Mormon beliefs and alleged practices, they can write truckloads of good biographies and histories about these plucky folk.

Norteños. Some Mexicans made the long, long journey from Mexico City to the Rio Grande Valley, learned to live with the pueblo people, and created a unique culture (including a great cuisine, which is *not* on the menu at Taco Bell, and it spells “chile” with an *e*).

Mormon Temple grounds in Salt Lake City in 1912.





Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, in 1867.

From the Pueblo Revolt to the atomic bomb and beyond, a treasure trove.

Miners outside California. The 49er gold rush has gotten attention. Despite the efforts of Jack London on Alaska and Mark Twain on Virginia City, Nevada, the rest has been mostly ignored. But Twain managed to launch the most dazzling of all Western writing careers there in Nevada. It's not just gold in those hills, there is a rogue's gallery of people to be captured in words.

The Chinese. From the gold-rushers to the prostitutes to getting the intercontinental railroad across the Sierra to the anti-Chinese laws to the Tong Wars and beyond. Great material, but only those who have lived it can write it.

The modern West. The gorilla in this room. It is a mother lode with precious few miners. When I moved to Wyoming four decades ago, I could sit at the counter of a local diner for an hour and be thrilled by the nutty, hairy, crazy stories told. The tavern offered the same in the evening. I could dine out for a year by describing the variety, thorny individuality, outlandish tales, and sheer vividness

of the people (certainly not always men) on those stools.

Soon I yearned to follow the path of John Steinbeck, who simply wandered through the docks, bars, restaurants and beaches of Monterey and, as he put it, learned to "open the page and let the stories crawl in by themselves." He found inhabitants who were "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," plus "saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," who were much the same folks. He won a Nobel Prize for that writing. Though we're unlikely to repeat that feat, he can inspire us to write better.

He is the first of the writers I want to salute for not telling the same old story over and over but instead diving into the unwritten West, the one right in our faces. The first sentence of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* made me a fan for life. "Cannery Row is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." Bingo.

Norman Maclean wrote *A River Runs Through It*, a novel about growing up around Missoula, Montana, in the middle of the 20th Century. It's so good that I think it alone got him elected to the Western Writers Hall of Fame.

David Lavender wrote a terrific memoir, *One Man's West*, about coming of age in southwestern Colorado in the 1930s, rambunctious in spirit and thoroughly Western.

Wallace Stegner wrote a whole library of fiction and history that illuminates the West. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* and *The Gathering of Zion* are as good as history of the West gets.

Tony Hillerman made himself a

legend telling stories about Navajos and their pueblo neighbors.

Frank Waters wrote first-rate books about the Southwest's Pueblo people.

Rudolfo Anaya has established himself as the godfather of our Latino literature by writing stories set among his own *Norteño* family and neighbors. More recently, Luis Alberto Urrea and Denise Chavez have written beautifully about people of Mexican heritage. John Nichols's *Milagro Beanfield War* is a wonderfully comic story set among *Norteños*.

The Indian world has proved full of terrific writers – Vine Deloria, N. Scott Momaday, Sherman Alexie, Robert J. Conley and others. Conley in particular taught me about my Cherokee ancestors.

Others of our own members, too: Elmer Kelton took Texas cowboys as his world and made them quirky, funny and completely winning.

Max Evans has written a mountain of books full of thornily original characters.

Loren D. Estleman has written detective stories set in the West in a vigorous prose style utterly his own.

Lucia St. Clair Robson dared to write about a woman kidnapped by Indians, and who, when rescued, didn't want to come back. (Yes, that did happen, to men and women.)

Richard S. Wheeler has written more than 80 novels and once told me there is not a shot fired in anger in any of them. *That's* staying away from shoot-em-ups.

Bottom line: Let's broaden our scope and write about the big, full West as it lived and breathed – blaze new trails in the West that has not yet been written.

