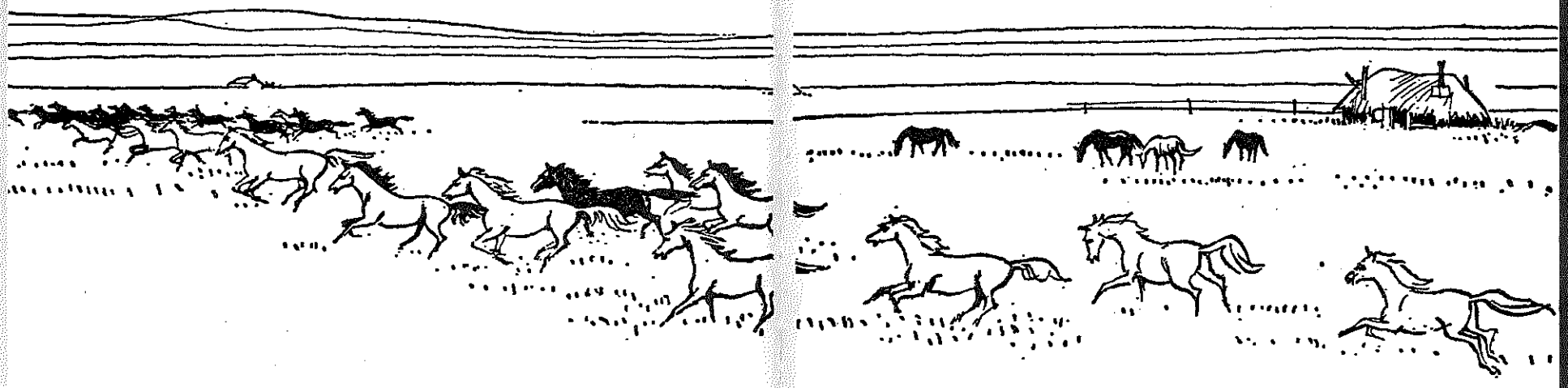
WALLACE STEGNER

Wolf Willow

A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier

PENGUIN BOOKS



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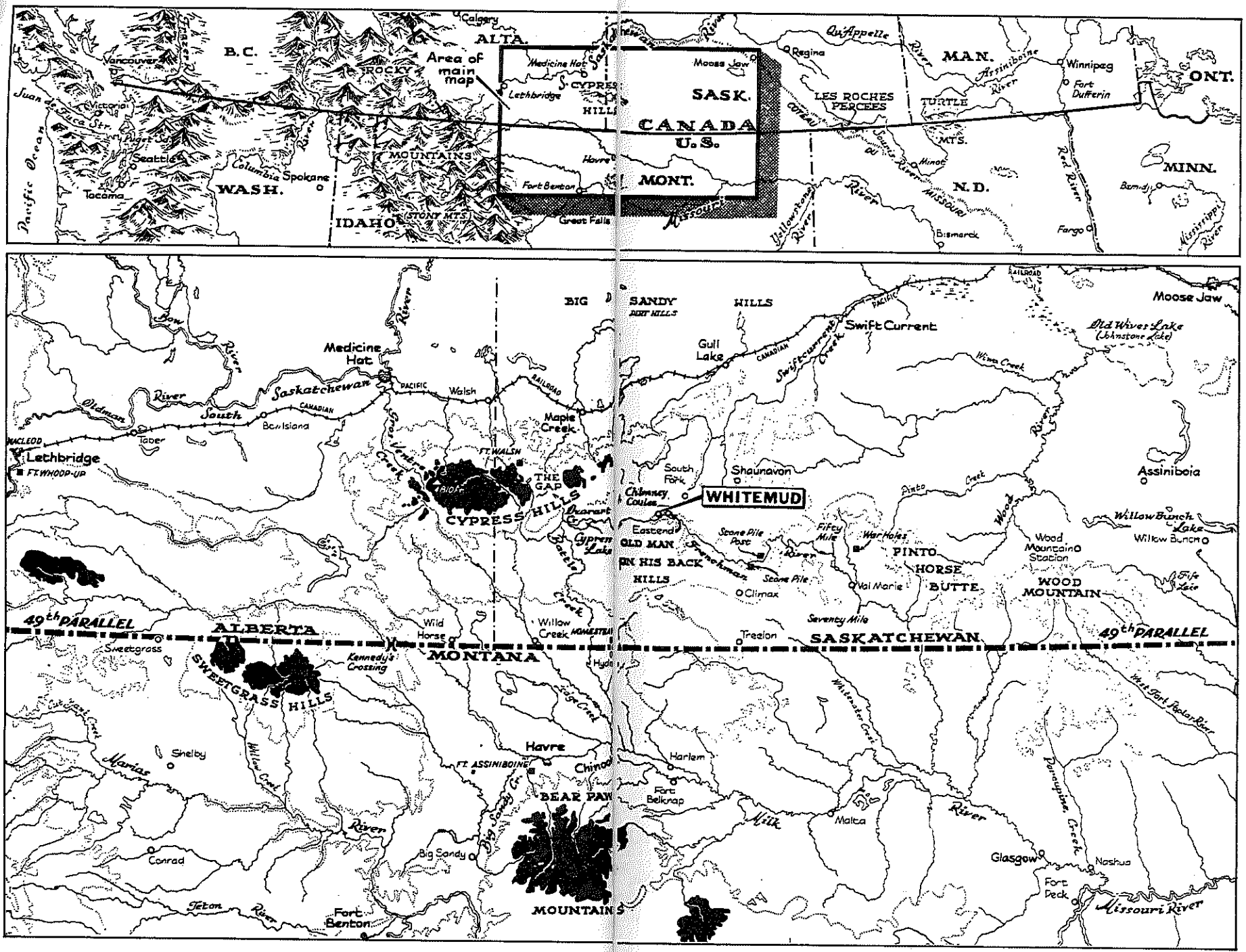
This is in memory of my mother


Area of main map
B.C.
ALTA.
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CANADA
U.S.
MONT.
N.D.
MINN.
WASH.
IDAHO
ROCKY MOUNTAINS
STONY MTS.
CYPRESS HILLS
LES ROCHES PERCEES
TURTLE MTS.
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Victoria
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Tacoma
Spokane
Columbia River
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Calgary
Medicine Hat
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Qu'Appelle River
Assiniboine River
Winnipeg
Fort Dufferin
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Fort Benton
Havre
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BIG SANDY BUTTE HILLS
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Old Wives Lake (Johnstone Lake)
Wood Mountain Station
Willow Bunch Lake
Assiniboia
Shaunavon
WHITEMUD
Chimney Coulee
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Eastend
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Scone Pile Post
Scone Pile
Fifty Mile
War Holes
PINTO HORSE BUTTE
WOOD MOUNTAIN
Val Marie
Climax
Frenchman River
Maple Creek
Walsh
Ft. Walsh
The Gap
Cypress Lake
Medicine Hat
Saskatchewan River
South Saskatchewan River
Oldman River
Taber
Lethbridge
Ft. Whoop-up
Bow River
Bow Island
49th PARALLEL
ALBERTA
SASKATCHEWAN
MONTANA
Sweetgrass
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Shelby
Marias River
Havre
Ft. Assiniboine
Chinook
Harlem
Fort Belknap
BEAR PAW MOUNTAINS
Big Sandy
Conrad
Teton River
Fort Benton
Malta
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Nashua
Fort Peck
Missouri River
Porcupine Creek
West Fork Poplar River
Whitewater Creek

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Wolf Willow

The town dump was our poetry and our history. We took it home with us by the wagonload, bringing back into town the things the town had used and thrown away. Some little part of what we gathered, mainly bottles, we managed to bring back to usefulness, but most of our gleanings we left lying around barn or attic or cellar until in some renewed fury of spring cleanup our families carted them off to the dump again, to be rescued and briefly treasured by some other boy. Occasionally something we really valued with a passion was snatched from us in horror and returned at once. That happened to the mounted head of a white mountain goat, somebody's trophy from old times and the far Rocky Mountains, that I brought home one day. My mother took one look and discovered that his beard was full of moths.

I remember that goat; I regret him yet. Poetry is seldom useful, but always memorable. If I were a sociologist anxious to study in detail the life of any community I would go very early to its refuse piles. For a community may be as well judged by what it throws away—what it has to throw away and what it chooses to—as by any other evidence. For whole civilizations we sometimes have no more of the poetry and little more of the history than this.

It is all *we* had for the civilization we grew up in. Nevertheless there was more, much more. If anyone had known that past, and told us about it, he might have told us something like this:

II

PREPARATION FOR A CIVILIZATION

The old, old maps which the navigators of the sixteenth century framed from the discoveries of Cabot and Cartier, of Varrazanno and Hudson, played strange pranks with the geography of the New World. The coast-line, with the estuaries of large rivers, was tolerably accurate; but the centre of America was represented as a vast inland sea whose shores stretched far into the Polar North; a sea through which lay the much-coveted passage to the long-sought treasures of the old realms of Cathay. Well, the geographers of that period erred only in the description of ocean which they placed in the central continent, for an ocean there is, and an ocean through which men seek the treasures of Cathay, even in our own times. But the ocean is one of grass, and the shores are the crests of the mountain ranges, and the dark pine forests of sub-Arctic regions. The great ocean itself does not present more infinite variety than does this prairie-ocean of which we speak. In winter, a dazzling surface of purest snow; in early summer, a vast expanse of grass and pale pink roses; in autumn too often a wild sea of raging fire. No ocean of water in the world

can vie with its gorgeous sunsets; no solitude can equal the loneliness of a night-shadowed prairie: one feels the stillness, and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence upon a silence almost as intense. This ocean has no past—time has been nought to it; and men have come and gone, leaving behind them no track, no vestige, of their presence. Some French writer, speaking of these prairies, has said that the sense of this utter negation of life, this complete absence of history, has struck him with a loneliness oppressive and sometimes terrible in its intensity. Perhaps so; but, for my part, the prairies had nothing terrible in their aspect, nothing oppressive in their loneliness. One saw here the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the Creator. Nor did the scene look less beautiful because nature alone tilled the earth, and the unaided sun brought forth the flowers.

CAPT. W. F. BUTLER, *The Great Lone Land*

1

First Look

In May, 1805, the six canoes and two pirogues of the Lewis and Clark expedition were working up the Missouri between the mouth of the Yellowstone and the Musselshell. The wooded bottoms and the wide greening plains outside so swarmed with game that "it is now only amusement for Capt. C and myself to kill as much meat as the party can consum." Hardly a day passed that they did not have an encounter with a grizzly —"a verry large and a turrible looking animal, which we found verry hard to kill"—and from morning to night they passed through "great numbers of buffalow, Elk, Deer, antilope, beaver, porcupins, & water fowls . . . such as, Geese, ducks of dift. kinds, and a fiew Swan."

They came watchfully, for they were the first. They came stiffened with resolution and alert with wonder. Beyond the bottoms with their cutbanks and their half-flooded willow-grown bars was the wide disk of the Plains, the same Plains they had known, wintering among the Mandans, but extended and extended beyond expectation and beyond credulity, unknown to every horizon and past it. Every river and creek that came in from south or west brought word of the Stony Mountains and the passes that might lead to the Great South Sea; every stream from north or northwest was a possible trail to the Saskatchewan in Prince Rupert's Land. More and more, as they moved westward, the country that lay between them and these desired goals was not merely unknown, it was unrumored. Lewis and

Clark first crossed it and tested its extent. Things they did not know, and could not discover from their informants the Minnetarees, they guessed at. And they noted everything, for everything was new.

May 8 brought them to the mouth of a large river emptying into the Missouri from the northwest. It looked to be navigable for boats and pirogues, and for canoes perhaps a long way, for it carried a strong flow of milky-white water and seemed to drain a great reach of country to the north. They looked up it with the eye of imagination: like the White Earth and other northern tributaries they had passed, this one intrigued them as a possible way to the Saskatchewan and the fur country of Prince Rupert's Land, bitterly contested by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwesters. They mistook the stream for the one the Minnetarees called The-River-That-Scolds-All-the-Others, and so thought themselves farther west than they were, but the name they gave it is the one it is still called by: Milk River. Walking up it several miles, they stood on its bluffy banks and strained their eyes into the characterless country from which it came. One feels that they abandoned it with regret, leaving it unexplored only because of the greater Unexplored that led them westward.

"Capt Clark who walked this morning on the Lard. shore ascended a very high point opposite to the mouth of this river; he informed me that he had a perfect view of this river and the country through which it passed for a great distance probably 50 or 60 Miles, that the river from it's mouth bore N.W. for 12 or 15 Miles when it forked, the one taking a direction nearly North, and the other to the West of N. West."

Standing where he stood, a few miles below the site of modern Fort Peck Dam, Clark was not able to look very far, actually, into that province of the unknown. His fifty or sixty miles of view would have shown him only uninterrupted prairie. The fork that came into the Milk from directly north was a minor creek now called the Porcupine. The Milk itself, if they had chosen to follow it, would have led them not into the north but on to the west, not to the Saskatchewan but to what would some day be Glacier National Park.

Still, they were barely out of sight of the northern divide that

they guessed at. To the northwest, up the Milk River valley, lost in the shimmer at the extreme edge of Clark's vision, another tributary did come in from the north, draining the plains that stretched on up across the 49th parallel. Followed, it would have led them through some very rough badlands, across plains that flattened to heat-wrinkled horizons. Along the course of the creek, especially on the north bank where the grass was thin, they would have found the country cut by big rough coulees; out on the level plains they would have found stretches of gravelly unprofitable soil thinly grassed and spotted with round cushions of cactus and with prickly pear and sage. In this gray-brown desolation the ground would have been bitten with burnouts and buffalo wallows, dusty clay depressions where gathering alkali salts had all but prohibited any growth, where wind had blown the powdery dust away and burrowing owls had shrugged their way under the lips overhung with curly grass, and whirlwinds had vacuum-cleaned them into shallow craters. This clay soil they would have found unbelievably sticky in the rain. The grass would have been the short curly variety, extraordinarily nourishing because it cured on the stem, that sometime in the next century would acquire the name of prairie wool.

Out here, far more than in the brushy Missouri bottoms, the explorers would have found a land with no transition between earth and sky: in the heat the horizons melted and ran; on the flats the sky and clouds moved in the reflecting sloughs. This earth was densely peopled with small creatures as with large—prairie dogs, picket-pin gophers, field mice, weasels, ferrets, badgers, coyotes, jackrabbits, burrowing owls. The plains were humped and pimpled with the tailings of their burrows, and across the interminable grasslands, even more homeless and fluid than the clouds that moved from west to east across the immense sky, or the winds that searched the grass and were almost never still, swept the blackness of the buffalo, the red-tawny shadows of antelope bands. In every slough went the mating mallards.

The birds of these prairies—ducks, robins, meadowlarks, sparrows, hawks, shrikes, blackbirds—were birds whose bond with the earth was strong. Their nests lay not in trees, for there were none, but in among the tules of sloughs, or in hidden cups under

the curl of the prairie grass, or among the blades of prickly pear. Some of them, like the burrowing owls, went underground and lived like rodents.

This tributary of the Milk whose willowed course groped across the northern plains was later to be called by some the Frenchman, by some the Whitemud. If Lewis and Clark had found and followed it, it would have led them across the 49th parallel and thence northwesterly to a low dome of hills as unknown as the river, and in the hills, 165 beeline miles from the junction with the Milk, to an unknown lake. The hills would later be called Montagne aux Cypres, the Cypress Hills; the lake was Cypress Lake. And from the bench above the unmarked source of the unrecorded stream, on a plateau-like height where oddly arctic vegetation replaced the characteristic vegetation of the Plains, they could have looked on, and still on, north and east and west, and seen only more plains, more antelope, more fleets of clouds running eastward before the constant wind.

But they would have been looking down the imperceptible hill that led to Hudson Bay.

They did not go north, and did not see it. In 1805 nobody had been as close as they, and their brief speculative stare at the southern edge of the region was the last look any white man would give it for more than a half century.

Exploration and the fur trade had consistently fallen short of the Hills or gone far around them. Henry Kelsey, on his doggerel-recorded excursion for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1690 and 1691, had come as far into the prairies as some point between the Saskatchewan and the Assiniboine, and in 1739 the Vérendrye called the Chevalier had penetrated to about the site of Prince Albert, below the junction of the North and South Saskatchewan. Neither Kelsey nor Vérendrye had come within several hundred miles of the Cypress Hills; and the fur trade whose entry into the far Northwest they heralded had followed the route of wood and water along the North Saskatchewan, anchoring itself on a chain of prairie posts: Fort Ellice, Fort Qu'Appelle, Fort Carlton, Fort Edmonton, Rocky Mountain House. Not until the late 1850's would the first white explorer, Palliser, make his way to the high country just north of the 49th parallel; not until the 1860's would *métis* winterers begin to build their shanty villages there; not until the 1870's would it be even partly surveyed; and not until the railroad established it in 1886 would there be a road of passage near it.

As late as 1860, one hundred and fifty years after Kelsey, more than a hundred after Vérendrye, more than fifty after Lewis and Clark, the Cypress Hills and the little river they mothered were lost in an unmapped West as wide as ocean, being saved, perhaps, after all the rehearsals on other frontiers, for the staging of one last drama of white settlement.

But lost as it was, and outside the reach of Lewis's and Clark's vision, the river demonstrated the acuteness of their geographical intuition. Just at the eastern base of the Hills there was then (it has since been drained by the CPR) a shallow pond that in spring released a tiny stream south to join the Frenchman, the Milk, and the Missouri, and another stream north to become the South Fork of the Swift Current, headed for Hudson Bay by way of the South Saskatchewan and Lake Winnipeg. The explorers were close to one of the geographical secrets they were looking for, one of those heights of land which direct the rivers how to flow and so change both politics and history. That little pond in what seemed to be a valley near the modern village of South Fork was balanced like a saucer on the continental divide; the Hills themselves divided the Gulf of Mexico from Hudson Bay.

And they were a divide in more ways than those that concerned the parting of the waters. If William Clark had been a prophet as well as an explorer, and a student of human watersheds as well as a geographer, he might have made some interesting speculations as he stood on the Milk River bluffs looking northward toward the region which would retain longer than any part of the United States, and any but the sub-arctic parts of Canada, the characteristics of the West that he knew in 1805.

2

The Divide

Slight causes often have profound effects. There is a theory held by some archaeologists and historians, for instance, that the absence of cobalt in the soil of northern Jutland resulted in a failure of the cattle to produce Vitamin B-12, which caused abortion sickness, which forced the inhabitants in the 2nd century B.C. southward upon more nutritive grass, which jarred their southern neighbors the Cimbri loose upon still more southerly tribes, which set off the great invasions of the Cimbri and Teutons which shook Rome. It may not be good history but it is an attractive parable, and comforts a student who would like to find specific causes, preferably simple and concrete, for human movements.

A few feet of altitude will do as well as the presence or absence of cobalt in the soil. It is a fact that Denmark's highest hill, about 600 feet high, is called Himmelberg, Heaven Mountain, a name that suggests the people near it must have been strongly influenced by it, though the mountain-bred Norwegians scorn it as a hole in the ground. In Saskatchewan, too, a little height can give distinction. The Cypress Hills, low as they are, are the highest point in Canada between Labrador and the Rockies. Everything about them is special, and everything special about them is explained by the accident of elevation. Their topography, their climate, their plants and animals, their peculiar geographical and zoological lags and survivals, even their human history, are what they are because this uplift has been pushed a thousand

to fifteen hundred feet above the plains that apron it. The highest point is at Head of the Mountain, over in Alberta, at 4800 feet; the average of the North Bench, the long narrow plain along the summit, is a little under 4000. The Plains southward are about 3000, those to the north slightly lower. The difference of a thousand feet is at that latitude enough to make the Hills a different world.

If political boundaries were established by topography and logic rather than by expedient and compromise, the North Bench would carry the international boundary, and the lower fifty miles of Saskatchewan would be politically what they are geographically—an uninterrupted part of the American High Plains, separated by the Cypress Hills from Prince Rupert's Land proper, which Charles II's grant of 1670 defined as all the country draining into Hudson Bay.

But the Hills are more than the northern edge of the Missouri watershed. Geologically they are an anomaly, and display in their higher strata rocks that were elsewhere planed away by the ice. Biologically they preserve Rocky Mountain plants and animals far out into the Plains, and southern species far into the north. Wild West longer than anywhere else, last home of buffalo and grizzlies, last sanctuary for the Plains hostiles, last survival of the open-range cattle industry, booby prize in a belated homestead rush, this country saved each stage of the Plains frontier long past its appointed time, and carried 19th-century patterns of culture well into the 20th. All because the Hills are a thousand feet higher than the rest of Saskatchewan.

Being hills, and having been hills since late Eocene or early Oligocene times, they have diverted around themselves various kinds of drainage, beginning with the ice.

In glacial times the climate here was wet and not extraordinarily cold. The ice which blanketed the northern Plains was formed even farther north. It flowed around the Hills and crossed them in what is now called the Gap, where Oxarart Creek comes down to join the Frenchman, but it never entirely covered them. An island eighty or ninety miles square stuck up above the ice sheet, diverted and split the slow flow from the north, and became an Ararat.

Before the ice sheet, many of the flowers, shrubs, and trees

that we know as characteristically Rocky Mountain species must have stretched more or less uninterruptedly eastward. The ice plowed between the high points of the mountains and the Cypress Hills and scraped bare a two-hundred-mile interval. But along the ridge of the Hills, spruce and pine and aspen and creeping cedar, wolf willow and mountain orchids, were left as a biological island. They are still there, preserved by their altitude in the first instance and by greater rainfall and a cooler climate since. Possessing wood and water, the Hills made a home for the fur-bearing woods animals, including beaver, and for woods game animals such as elk and bear, and ultimately for the men who pursued the woodland way of life in contradistinction to the Plains life based on the buffalo. This was a woodland biome within the vast Great Plains biome.

And full of survivors of various kinds. To the bench, as the ice came down, the creatures of the country retreated for refuge, stayed treed on the plateau while the ice groaned and ground around the flanks, and crept down again after the ice retreated. That is one explanation, though not necessarily the correct one, why there are now in the Saskatchewan-Montana country scorpions whose nearest relatives are hundreds of miles to the southwest, and horned toads, solpugids, and hog-nosed vipers with no parallels nearer than six hundred miles away in Utah and Nevada.

As if trying to be a laboratory of the unbroken life history of the region, the Hills saved even their fossils when most of the High Plains lost them. In the formations near the summit of the bench lie the petrified bones of saber-toothed cats, camels, titanotheres each of whose great chopping teeth was nearly as big as a teacup, and among them impressions of cinnamon and walnut and redwood leaves, fossilized fruit resembling figs, something like coconuts. These all lie in the Cypress Hills formation of the Oligocene. Two layers below, in the Frenchman formation of the Cretaceous, streams and run-off coulees have exposed the Age of Reptiles, and fossils of Tyrannosaurus and Triceratops record another ancient ecology, meat-eater and grass-eater, hunter and hunted.

Along this wooded, coulee-cut plateau the clouds scrape their bottoms and give up rain. An average of four inches more falls here than falls on the surrounding arid Plains—the luck of elevation, and out of elevation a special economy. The coulees of the high ground have always been an orchard of wild fruit—chokecherries, pin cherries, saskatoons, high bush cranberries, raspberries, gooseberries, buffalo berries, currants both red and black. In the days before settlement the berry patches were a happy hunting ground for bears; and the antelope and on occasion the buffalo, chased in by drouth, fires, or hunters from the Plains, found the benches a perennial hayfield, while the wooded coulees provided winter shelter in the blizzards that came down straight and undeflected from the Pole.

The elevation which created this game sanctuary with its amenities of rainfall, living streams, grass, shelter, berries, and timber served also, partly by a historical freak and partly because it was a visible barrier across otherwise characterless country, to mark a boundary between tribes and kinds of men. It lay between the Canadian fur trade along the Saskatchewan and the American fur trade on the Missouri. It likewise lay between the Cree and Assiniboin pressing west and south from the routes of that trade, and the Piegan, Blood, and Blackfoot of the Blackfoot Confederacy raiding south and east from the foot of the Rockies. Before too long, as the drama of the Plains Indians worked toward its climax, it would be looked upon as a sanctuary by Sioux, Crow, Gros Ventre, and Nez Percé falling back northward before American cavalry, miners, and especially the hide hunters who were systematically destroying the buffalo. Humanity, like the ice and the water, flowed around the edges of this uplift. Technically, in the view of Alexander Henry and others of the fur traders, it was Assiniboin country. Actually it was No Man's Land.

The Cypress Hills came into the knowledge of English topographers in 1859, when Captain John Palliser reported to the Royal Geographical Society on the progress of his British North American Exploring Expedition of 1857-58. But Palliser and his associates were much more interested in passes through the Canadian Rockies than in the arid country that much later would become known as "Palliser's Triangle," which he held to be—with some justice—unfit for settlement. There is only one mention of the Hills: "Although my journey to the western extremity of the boundary line was necessarily a rapid one, I determined on a

visit to the 'Cypress Hills.' I was anxious to see this part of the country, in consequence of having heard many reports of its wonderful timber and fine rich soil. I found great tracts of splendid timber wasted by fire; there still remain, however, many valuable pines, and the land is rich, and capable of producing several grain crops in succession without manure."

That is all, from Palliser's quick look in 1858. Henry Youle Hind, who conducted the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858, did not visit the Hills nor approach near them, though his map, published in 1860, puts them by name in approximately their correct place. The map published with Captain Butler's *Great Lone Land* in 1873 vaguely marks but does not name them, perhaps because Butler too, in his strenuous and often heroic journeyings, missed them by several hundred miles. To most of the Hudson's Bay and Northwest Company traders, as to the mapmakers, they remained for a long time hardly more exact than a rumor, for the fur trade flowed far to the north along the North Saskatchewan, where the Plains and the Northern Woodlands met, and the beaver were plentiful and the Indians interested in hunting them.

Says Isaac Cowie, the first Hudson's Bay trader to come into them, "As far back as the memory and traditions of the Crees then living extended, these Cypress Hills—'me-nach-tah-kak' in Cree—had been neutral ground between many warring tribes, south of the now marked international boundary, as well as the Crees and Blackfeet and their friends. No Indian for hunting purposes ever set foot on those hills, whose wooded coulees and ravines became the undisturbed haunt of all kinds of game, and especially abounded in grizzly bears and the beautifully antlered and magnificent was-cay-sou, known variously by the English as red deer and elk. Only wary and watchful war parties of any tribe ever visited the hills, and so dangerous was it to camp in them that it was customary for such parties to put up barricades about the spots on which they stayed overnight."

That was standard opinion in 1871, and Cowie's experiences during his one winter in the Hills amply corroborated everything the Cree had told him, but that story belongs in a later chapter.

3

Horse and Gun

Indians were a part of our boyhood fantasy, but our image of them was as mixed as our image of most things. Our Indians certainly did not come from life, and we were a little early to get them from the movies. We got them from books, and we did not discriminate among the books from which we got them.

One of our principal sources was Fenimore Cooper, and no Mark Twain had as yet broken in upon us with raucous horse laughs to destroy our faith in Cooper's delicate arts of the forest. We were masters of the lore of the broken twig; we trod the willow bottoms silently, single file, pigeon-toed, like Tuscaroras or Mohicans. Much of our Indian play demonstrated the stubborn persistence of inherited notions, for the Indians we played came mainly out of novels written eighty years before and two thousand miles away, out of the French and Indian wars, out of the darkness of the deep deciduous forests, out of the Noble Savage sentimentalities of Chateaubriand and Thomas Campbell. They came more or less from where our unnaturalized history came from, where our poetry and geography came from—where even our prejudices came from, including the prejudices against real Indians that lay so unconformably upon our literary and sentimental attitudes.

Real Indians we saw perhaps once a year, when a family or two in a rickety democrat wagon came down from somewhere and camped for a few days in the river brush. Probably they were