


GOLDEN DREAMS

COLORADO, CALIFORNIA, AND THE REIMAGINING OF AMERICA

by Elliott West



Photographers, whose work came of age just as post-Civil War settlers began moving into the interior West in earnest, helped transform how the nation conceived of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Above, part of Ferdinand V. Hayden's survey party is all but swallowed up in the expanse of the North Platte River country at Red Buttes, a popular crossing near present-day Casper, Wyoming, in an 1870s William H. Jackson photograph.

IN THE EVE OF THE CIVIL WAR, America had a hole right in the middle of it. Not an actual pit, of course; no one riding west from Kansas City would have tripped and fallen into an abyss. The hole was in America as it existed in millions of minds. People in the eastern and far western United States pictured the country between them as detached, physi-

cally and historically. Plains and mountains seemed to have no part in what America was and would be.

That hole began suddenly to fill on July 6, 1858, the day a party of thirteen prospectors found gold dust in a small creek flowing from the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. The next spring a stampede to the diggings had an economic and environmental impact that was enormous and obvious.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Another change was easier to miss. The Colorado gold rush was a key moment in American mental geography. With its sister episode, the discovery of California gold, it reshaped the nation's perception of itself. During the middle years of the nineteenth century, the republic changed in size, purpose, and values. The two gold rushes helped knit its parts into a newly imagined union—sure in its blessings, imperial in vision, blindly arrogant, naively confident of a future of untarnishable luster.

The momentous shift in America's self-image began during the tumultuous 1840s. The decade opened with the nation two-thirds the present size of the lower forty-eight states. Its western border lay against Texas and along the crest of the Rocky Mountains, on the far western edges of the Great Plains. The image of that borderland was vague and unpromising. Occasionally it was called the "Great American Desert" but most often the "prairies" and the "plains." The public understood those terms to mean great grasslands, windswept and rolling. It was well known that this country hosted lots of wild game, but the image was of open and exposed landscape, mostly treeless and covered with short, wispy vegetation. It was interesting, but in a Mongolian sort of way.¹

In any case, it was obvious what this country was *not*. It had no place in the nation's ideas of future greatness. By the 1840s the early republican dream of agrarian abundance had merged with two others: hopes for a modest but vibrant industry; and a vigorous commerce sending the fruits of garden and factory out to the world. In those terms the plains and the mountain fringe were next to useless. At best this coun-

try was a possible pasture, but as a future domain of full harvests, bustling market towns, and the occasional metropolis, it seemed a bum bet.

But in 1840 that was no problem. The plains were out there on the farthest edge of things. In fact, some thought the border's unpromising strangeness would serve us well. Zebulon Pike, the first agent of the United States to describe the region as desert and steppes, thought that overly restless Americans, "so prone to rambling and extending themselves on frontiers," would finally stop their wasteful ways and live by

proper husbandry once they faced this vast expanse fit only for herds of game and tribes of "wandering and uncivilized aborigines."² The plains and mountain front, then, were the republic's outer edge in a double sense. Geographically, this was our western boundary; mentally, it was the place where the vision of abundance and purpose weakened and faded toward nothing.

Then suddenly the national map was dramatically redrawn. In three great gulps—the annexation of Texas, the granting of the far Northwest from England, and the seizure of California and the Southwest in the Mexican War—more land was acquired than in any other previous act, including the Louisiana Purchase. Almost overnight America became a transcontinental, dual-oceanic nation. In 1844 our size was impressive. In 1848 it was imperial.

Next came arguably the most stunning coincidence in American history. At exactly the moment of the last act of expansion, just nine days before the treaty was initialed ending the Mexican War, James Marshall found those famous glittering flecks in the American River in northern California. "Boys, I believe I have found a gold mine," he announced.³ He was right, and within a few years tens of thousands more came looking for theirs, first from other parts of the Pacific Coast, then from South America, the Sandwich Islands, Canton,



The discovery of gold in California gave the nation a continental breadth and encouraged new perspectives. California soon promised not only rich mineral wealth but agricultural abundance as well, as depicted in the illustration, "California Fruits and Vegetables," in Albert D. Richardson's *Beyond the Mississippi* (1869, opp. p. 453).

1. For a survey of impressions of the region, see Martin J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert and the American Frontier, 1800-1882: Popular Images of the Plains," in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 48-79.

2. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike . . . during the Years 1805-6-7*, 3 vols. (New York, 1895), 2:525.

3. Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West* (New York, 1963), 13.

4. Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago, 1935), 168, 89-90.

5. "Californian Gold," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, n.s., 24 (January 1849), 3; *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2d sess., February 27, 1849; *American Review*, 9 (April 1849), 331-38.

6. "Californian Gold," *United States Magazine*, 3; Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, 168.

and Australia, then from Europe and elsewhere in the United States. It was history on fast-forward: dozens of towns within a few months, a port rivaling most in the mercantile world, an explosive economy rapidly diversifying.

These two developments—expansion to the Pacific and the discovery of gold—reshaped fundamentally the nation's image of itself and its future. The ballyhoo and chest-puffing that followed was as much about what would be done with these western possessions as about their size and expanse. This new territory, many said, brimmed with the raw stuff of our old agricultural vision. "Shall this garden of beauty . . . lie dormant in its wild and useless luxuriance?" asked an Illinois editor. The question was rhetorical, but many answered anyway that California's broad valleys and the wide embrace of Texas held fabulous fresh potential for America as a prolific garden, "not [only] for our own use," New York Democrats assured their supporters, "but for the use of man."⁴

The coincidence of gold, however, brought out and amplified the newer motifs of the national vision. Gold summoned images of bustling, productive cities and far-reaching commerce. The spirit of gold seeking—its plunging optimism and mix of labor and luck—fit the values of an urban speculative culture far better than the earlier rural faith in thrift, steady sweat, and plod. Gold was "the motive power which will put in operation the already-prepared vast machinery of American enterprise," a memorial of California citizens declared early in 1849. It was "but a means of accelerating the march to national supremacy." Congressman John

McClernand (D-Illinois) predicted that the new country's resources, "trophies of a just and brilliant war," would soon birth a great city beside San Francisco Bay, bind Europe to Asia with thriving commerce, and inspire a railroad linking the Atlantic and Pacific. The *American Review* added soon afterwards that gold "contains the elements, the principles, the forces" to establish "a great American epoch in the history of the world. . . . The acquisition of these territories on the Pacific, seems destined to make our country the world's historical center."⁵

Coast would be bound to coast, trade to mines and factories. Cities and farms, east and west, would be woven into a grand continental enterprise. A strong racist undertone ran through this vision. Current residents of the western empire, Native American primitives and Hispanics sunk in "voluptuous pride" and "inglorious ease," had neither the eyes to see the land's promise nor the will to fulfill it, according to the new prophets. An Illinois editor wrote that these lesser peoples were "reptiles [who must] either crawl [away] or be crushed."⁶ First conquest, then the earth's sudden gift of its most precious resource: the way was open for the full flower of national destiny. America would be the golden land in truth as well as metaphor.

But there was a problem. The grand vision of farms, manufacturing, and trade had been applied to the country east of the Missouri, and now it was projected westward to the Pacific Coast. But what about the country in between? It remained apparently useless. The plains and mountains were no longer our western fringe, however. They were the American center. The vision of

Despite California's promise, the nation's western interior remained "a dreary waste," a vast, arid expanse to be negotiated and crossed but not settled. Rather, emigrant dreams lay far to the west, as the glowing rays of promise emerging from the western horizon indicate in the illustration below from Samuel Bowles's *Our New Northwest* (1869, p. 30).



national destiny reached out *over* the continent, but it did not yet *cover* the continent. To the contrary. The heart of the expanded nation seemed to have nothing much to do with anything. As the former mountain man and present Indian agent Thomas Fitzpatrick put it, there was “a great disconnecting wilderness” at the nation’s center.⁷ America, that is, had a hole right in the middle of it.

Travelers crossing from the imagined land of plenty in the east to the other on the Pacific called the plains “a dreary waste as far as the eye can reach,” a “barren, trackless waste . . . an expanse of hot, bare sand,” a bleak landscape that “equals any other scene on our continent for desolation.” An overlander in the late 1850s thought the plains had only one useful function—erosion: “It looks as if the great Creator has made this vast desert as a sort of storehouse of materials from which he is day by day transporting them to other regions, where they can be made more available for the use and to the benefit of man.”⁸

True, there were occasional wild and exotic sights—bison and antelope, spectacular storms, mirages, and the Plains Indians, who, travelers believed, always threatened to attack or rob them. But mostly travelers were oppressed by what one called “so much sameness.” The rolling, unbroken openness reminded many immigrants of the high seas. The plains were “an ocean of land, the same day in and day out,” Tom Sanders remembered. An army unit traveled four days

through a treeless stretch of eastern Colorado. When a line of streamside cottonwoods finally appeared on the horizon, an Irish private called out: “Be Jesus! We’re in sight of land again!”⁹

The comparison went beyond appearance. On the plains, as at sea, people might find high adventure, or see schools of playful bison frolicking in the grassy waves, or meet those colorful but threatening land pirates, the Pawnees and Sioux. But for anyone hoping to move west, the Great Plains and Rockies comprised an alien place with no more promise than the middle of an ocean as somewhere to stop, start a farm, or plant a town. Like the sea, this country was something to get across.

Once again, however, mental geography was about to change. Only a generation into the future the American center would be pictured as the heartland of national hope, a region of bursting fields and prospering communities offering all we needed to confirm our destiny as a great and powerful people. The shift, one of the most sweeping in our history, was a startling reprise of the recent transformation of the Pacific Coast. As in California, the central moment came as a flash of light in a mountain stream.

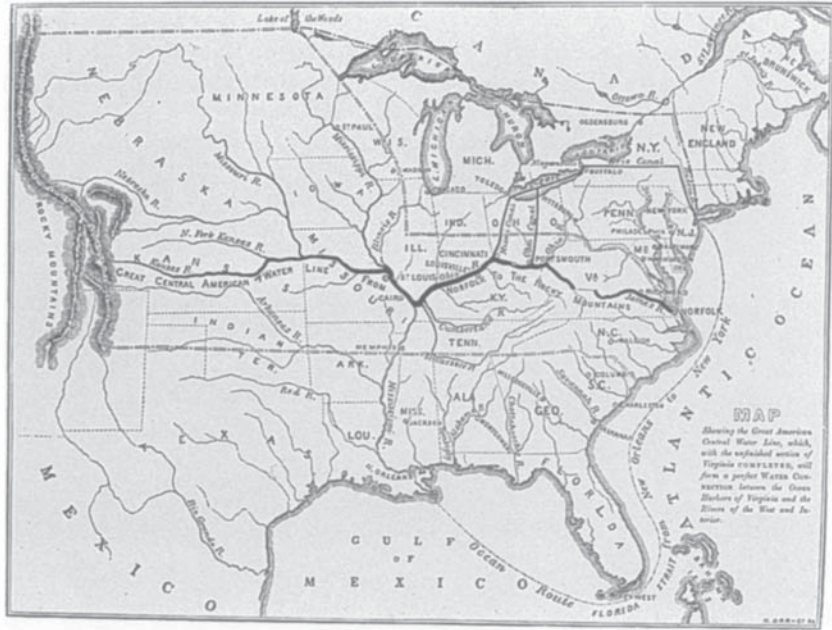
The change began, however, in that straggling line of Missouri River towns along the eastern edge of the plains—Kansas City and Westport, Leavenworth, Atchison, St. Joseph, and a few others. In 1850 these communities considered themselves ports o’ call where

If the geography of the Great Plains and Rockies was colorful, it was also alien and threatening, seemingly made so in part by the native tribes ever ready to raid and plunder. Whatever their intentions, Indians did keep a close eye on overland emigrants, as depicted in O. C. Seltzer’s *Indians Watching a Wagon Train* (1898, oil on canvas, 33” x 47”).

MHS Museum, Helena



Misgivings about the desert-like qualities of the Great Plains notwithstanding, imagination soon outdistanced reality, and by the mid-1850s boosters and dream-chasers envisioned profitable cultivation well west of effective settlement in eastern Kansas. As the map at right shows, one promoter even foresaw regular steamboat traffic from the Atlantic Coast to Colorado's Front Range.



overland travelers could outfit themselves for the long voyages across the inland sea of land to the Pacific settlements. But as farmers moved into eastern Kansas the towns also became market centers for those lovely prairies in the first thirty or so miles beyond the Missouri. In a classic promotional impulse, civic leaders soon pushed outward the imagined zone of cultivation. If corn was harvested thirty miles west of Leavenworth, why not fifty? If the land had been cropped around Lawrence, why not around Topeka, and fifty, eighty, a hundred miles farther on?

By 1855 this creeping boosterism had pushed the agrarian dream well past the middle of present-day Kansas. Flattering military reports of the far eastern plains were projected onto a much wider region, so land considerably west of the ninety-eighth meridian was pictured as well watered and nicely timbered.¹⁰ Everyone understood that living well on the plains depended on rivers, the larger and more reliable the better. Now one booster wrote that the Arkansas rose in Utah, cut all the way through the Rockies, and flowed vigorously across the plains, “watering and fertilizing the valleys through which it meanders.” The Smoky Hill and Republican rivers, which in fact rose on the plains near the present Kansas-Colorado border, more

than a hundred miles east of the Front Range, also were said to begin “far up among the Rocky Mountains” and tumble to the Missouri through banks thick with timber: oaks six feet through the trunk, elms, sycamores, walnut, cherry, and beech.¹¹

Farmers tilling the “rich, black vegetable mould” would send their bounty to market via steamboats that would ascend these rivers for hundreds of miles, according to promoters. One provided a map predicting regular steamboat traffic from the Atlantic coast to the base of the Rockies, near what is today Denver. Railroad companies joined the chorus. As they built toward the Missouri Valley they looked ahead hungrily to an inland empire full of farmers shipping their crops back east. A pamphlet for the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, first to reach the Missouri, crowed about the grand possibilities of western Kansas: “As the whale remarked to Jonah, ‘I deem it a good opening for a young man.’”¹²

By the late 1850s dream-chasers could stand in the Missouri Valley and imagine the great American garden reaching out to some indefinite point to the west.

7. Thomas Fitzpatrick to A. Cumming, November 19, 1853, in *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1853* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 370.

8. Perry Kline Reminiscence, 61, Colorado State Historical Society, Denver, Colorado (hereafter CSHS); Francis Parkman, Jr., *The Oregon Trail* (New York, 1982), 106; “Diary of E. H. N. Patterson,” in *Overland Routes to the Gold Fields, 1859, from Contemporary Diaries*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Glendale, Calif., 1942), 129-30.

9. Rose Bell Diary, May 30, 1862, CSHS; Thomas Sanders Reminiscence, 27-28, Western History Collections, Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado; Merrill J. Mattes, ed., “Capt. L. C. Easton’s Report: Fort Laramie to Fort Leavenworth via Republican River in 1849,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 20 (May 1953), 404.

10. The reports most often quoted (or rather misquoted) were John Charles Frémont, “A Report of the Exploring Expedition to Oregon and North California, in the Years 1843-44,” in Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. 1, *Travels from 1838 to 1844* (Urbana, Ill., 1970); and Lieutenant Francis Bryan, “Report of Lt. Francis T. Bryan,” 35th Cong., 1st sess., 1857, House Exec. Doc. No. 2, Appendix H, serial 943, pp. 455-520.

11. An excellent example is Walter B. Sloan, *History and Map of Kansas and Nebraska: Describing Soil, Climate, Rivers, Prairies, Mounds, Forest, Minerals, Roads, Cities, Villages, Inhabitants, and Such Other Subjects as Relates to this Region—Politics Excepted* (Chicago, 1855).

12. Hannibal, Missouri, *Messenger*, September 30, 1858.



Gold's discovery west of what would become Denver supercharged booster dreams. In 1859, one hundred thousand argonauts like the unidentified man pictured at left entered the so-called Pike's Peak gold rush. They sought to claim their share of what William Green Russell (below) and a dozen others had found the previous summer. Subsequently, the emigrant's dream of Kansas, depicted humorously in J. H. Beadle's



The Undeveloped West (1873, p. 217, below right), seemed possible: farms so productive, pigs went about with forks stuck in their sides.



THE EMIGRANT'S DREAM OF KANSAS.

Nonetheless, the process was almost all puff and blow. Or, as one writer admitted, no "foot-prints" of civilization were yet imprinted on most of the plains.

Then came the moment that sent this change rocketing forward. In summer 1858 William Green Russell, a Georgian with experience in the California diggings, led a party to pursue long-standing rumors of gold in the eastern Rockies. Word of their modest find on July 6 filtered out to Kansas City and arrived on the East Coast ten years almost to the day of the first astounding reports from California in September 1848. The United States was mired in one of the worst depressions of the century, and over the winter a shabby army of men, shaken loose by the hard times, gravitated to the Missouri Valley. "Hoosiers, Suckers, Corn crackers, Buckeyes, Red-horses, Arabs and Egyptians," said the *Missouri Republican*,

some with ox wagons, some with mules, but the greatest number on foot, with their knapsacks and old-fashioned rifles and shotguns. . . . Many have sold out all their homes, all their valuables, to furnish themselves with an outfit for Pike's Peak mines. . . . [They] blindly rush headlong into the wild delusion of glittering sands full of golden eggs.¹³

In spring 1859, more than a hundred thousand persons, twice the number that crossed to California ten

years earlier, flooded across the central plains to the Front Range. They walked, pushed wheelbarrows, pulled handcarts, and rode in farm wagons, ambulances, carriages, and phaetons drawn by oxen, mules, horses, milch cows, and, in one case, four hunting dogs. There was a "wind wagon" fitted with sails—a comic failure, but testimony of the gold seekers' imagination and naive hopes. One group afoot planned to sleep in the barns they thought Indians had built for their buffaloes.¹⁴

The diggings that had sparked the rush soon played out, but in early summer genuine strikes were confirmed in the mountains, and as miners flocked to Central City, Idaho Springs, and other camps, a cluster of supply towns blossomed along the base of the Front Range, Denver the most prominent. Within another year a rough political structure was in place. A critical core of Anglo-American society had appeared in what had been pictured as the republic's empty center.

In reshaping the mental map, the Colorado gold rush obviously had its most immediate impact on the Rocky Mountains. The Front Range was now seen as a place of vibrant towns populated by hard-muscled young

13. *Missouri Republican*, March 27, 1859, in *Colorado Gold Rush: Contemporary Letters and Reports, 1858-1859*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Glendale, Calif., 1941), 17.

14. Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998), 147-51.

15. Hafen, ed., *Colorado Gold Rush*, 207, 225, 231.

16. Kansas City, Missouri, *Western Journal of Commerce*, March 12, 1859.

17. For a list of all known guidebooks, see West, *Contested Plains*, 387-89.

18. William N. Byers and John H. Kellom, *A Hand Book of the Gold Fields of Nebraska and Kansas* (Chicago, 1859); Toledo, Wabash and Great Western Railroad Co. *Direct Route to Pikes Peak and the Gold Regions* (New York, 1859).

19. Pratt and Hunt, *Guide to the Gold Mines of Kansas: Containing an Accurate and Reliable Map* (Chicago, 1859), 14; LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Pikes Peak Gold Rush Guide Books of 1859* (Glendale, Calif., 1941), 285; *Report and Map of the Superintendent and Engineer of the Smoky Hill Expedition, Together with a Table of Distances* (Leavenworth, Kans., 1861); Parker and Huyett, *The Illustrated Miners' Hand-Book and Guide to Pike's Peak* (St. Louis, 1859), 16.

Americans pulling wealth from the ground, the newest evidence of God's blessing on His chosen people.

The mental force of the gold strikes was felt just as powerfully on the plains that stretched out six hundred miles to the east. Until now the push for reimagining this country had come from its eastern border. Now a new vision was projected from its western edge, from the Rockies. Correspondents wrote that area valleys were already being planted: "That the Platte and Arkansas bottoms will yield abundantly to the industrious farmer, there can be no doubt, [and] neither can they be excelled for cattle." Others added that High Plains winters were so mild that domestic herds could graze all winter with hardly a shiver as gardeners tilled happy rows of vegetables virtually year-round.¹⁵

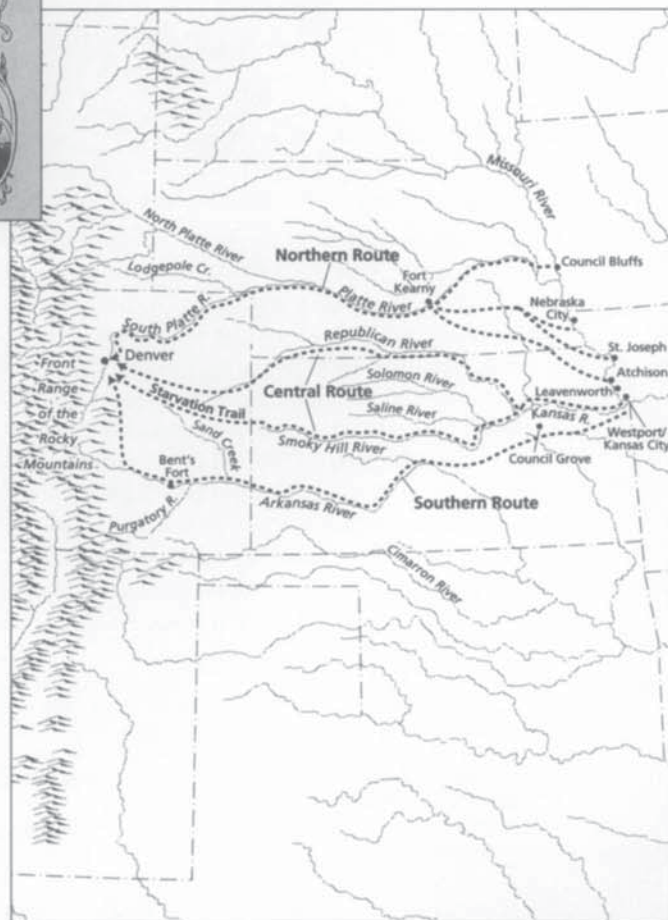
Back on the eastern side of the plains, Missouri Valley boosters also moved into high gear. Leaders in each town worked to portray their jumping-off place as the true gateway to the gold mines. The trick lay in convincing the crowds that the overland route closest to a particular town was the easiest and fastest way west. There were three such routes—the northern road up the main valley of the Platte River, the southern path up the Arkansas River, and the central route up the Kansas River. Local boosters tried to raise one road over the others with glowing descriptions of its lovely terrain, its rich grasses and stands of timber, its sure sources of water.

Thus urban promotion translated directly into a remaking of the image of the plains. As one critic wrote, town boosters "have changed the course of rivers, removed mountains, lengthened streams and made bleak hills and barren sand wastes smooth and even highways."¹⁶

More than fifty guidebooks appeared in 1859, most of them linked to one town and one route.¹⁷ Champions of the northern and southern roads reported lush pastures, plenty of water, and easy travel all the way to the mines. The central route ascended the Kansas and

Republican rivers through country known to only a few non-Indians. Advocates of this route, undeterred by mere ignorance, described the region in the sunniest terms. Repeating earlier booster fictions, they said the two rivers flowed all the way from the Rockies (rather than rising far out on the plains). One book's map showed a large Kansas Lake on what was in fact the arid high plains. Another, answering immigrants' concern for protection, simply moved two forts northward from the Arkansas River to the central route it described as lush and flat—and now safe as well.¹⁸

To pump traffic westward through their stores, hotels, and liverys, Missouri Valley promoters also puffed up the land awaiting travelers at the far end of the trails. The Rockies were littered with fifty-dollar nuggets and dusted with "the purest gold that has ever been discovered." But that was only the start. Farmland of the high plains, according to one guidebook, "recalls the luxuriance of the tropics, or the magnificence of the ideal world of old navigators." Rumors of drought were dismissed, and in any case, wrote a promoter, there was "a peculiarity in the soil that enables it to withstand the absence of rain." Ranchers too would find magnificent pasturelands of natural grasses that could sustain "millions of cattle" year-round.¹⁹



From Elliott West, *The Centrifugal Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 118.

The Pikes Peak argonauts of 1859 had more than fifty guidebooks to choose from, including William N. Byers and John Kellom's *Handbook* (above). Born of urban boosterism, such guidebooks shaped anew popular images of the plains and how to get there. As the map at right shows, there were three general routes: the Northern Route along the Platte; the Southern Route along the Arkansas; and the Central Route along either the Republican or Smoky Hill.



Denver, “Queen City of the Plains,” soon constituted an urban hub in what had been the nation’s empty quarter. It offered, as journalist Albert D. Richardson described it, “a strange medley” of people. “There were Americans from every quarter of the Union,” he wrote in text accompanying the illustration at left in *Beyond the Mississippi* (1869, opp. p. 186), as well as “Mexicans, Indians, half-breeds, trappers, speculators, gamblers, desperadoes, broken-down politicians and honest men.”

wintering along the Front Range became the seed herds for ranchers; farmers planted crops beside every likely tributary of the South Platte and upper Arkansas; Denver and other piedmont towns funneled goods in and out of mountain settlements. Over the next decade the Missouri Valley was bound by trade and interest to the western plains and Rockies, and both regions were woven into the rest of America by the rhetoric of national ascendance. The gold that poured from the mountains was called the fuel of greatness. It would build eastern factories, which in turn would heft us to our proper place. Growing cities would be fed by the generous soil of the heartland. The great pasture of the center, “boundless, endless, gateless,” would fatten the cattle that every great nation must have, “vegetable food alone degenerating people to the condition of the Macaroni Eaters of Italy.”²¹

Carnivore dreams are a good reminder of how mass imagination helps determine what we do with the places we inhabit, and thus shapes the history we make. Imagined America changed more between 1845 and 1876 than at any time in our history. The vital events are well known—with two conspicuous exceptions. Gold rushes, one on the far western edge of the expanded nation and the other in the middle, redrew the mental contours of the nation far more than we have recognized.

Events of 1845–1848 left America thinking continentally, but by deepening the strains between North and South they came close to fatally fracturing the expanded nation. The Civil War insured that the Union would remain; it allowed the survival of a vague image of an ocean-to-ocean nation. But what exactly would that nation be? The redrawing of America, begun fifteen years before the war, continued for a dozen years after it. This was our larger, more significant reconstruction. It involved far more than pulling the South back into the Union. The entire nation was being re-perceived, with the role and image of each region rethought.

Gold reconstructed the West and America, physically and mythically. The strikes in California and Colorado drew floods of new population and spawned

Precisely ten years after the reimagining of the Pacific Coast, the same process was transforming the continental center. Gold again worked its magic. Once the precious metal was found, all else was assumed to follow: the original dream of flowering gardens, the newer vision of instant cities, budding industry, and speculative fever, and with those, a robust trade. The new Eldorado, an editor stated, would be “the evangel of a new commerce.” The sleeping possibilities of mountain and plain would awaken, and “the buffalo path will turn into highways for hurrying merchandise.”²⁰

Wish fed reality. Within months mercantile outposts were popping up beside the Platte road. Freight cattle

20. St. Louis *Daily Missouri Democrat*, November 24, 1858.
 21. Dr. Hiram Latham, *Trans-Missouri Stock Raising. The Pasture Lands of North America: Winter Grazing* (Omaha, 1871), 6, 23.
 22. U. S. Office of Indian Affairs, “Report in Full of an Interview Between Indian Tribes of the State of Kansas and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (Mr. Bogy). Reported by C. H. Emerson, January 30, 1867,” Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

23. Kansas Bureau of Immigration, *The State of Kansas. A Home for Immigrants. Agricultural, Mineral, and Commercial Resources of the State . . .* (Topeka, Kans., 1865), 5-7.
 24. Napa, California, *Register*, July 8, 1876.

centers of Anglo-American power where none had been before. They also gave a shape to the new territory's vague promise of instant cities, humming trade, bountiful fields. Unlike images of earlier Wests, fitting a slower, steadier rural life and virtues, those of the gold rushes caught a new intoxicating spirit of plunge and grab. Mining camps, chugging locomotives, and throbbing smelters—they were fitting symbols of the new national vision.

That vision was as flawed as ever. Anyone who got in the way, notably Indian peoples and Hispanics, at worst were assaulted as lower life-forms and at best patronized as anachronisms who were, as the commissioner of Indian Affairs told a delegation of Plains tribes in 1867, "by the law of God, and the great law of nature, passing away."²² In unstoppable numbers the newcomers rolled over everything before them, then paid their own price for the overblown rhetoric. Droughts and blizzards devastated plains settlers in 1860 and 1861, again later in the decade, then again in 1872. Thousands were driven back east. Mining camps busted by the dozen. Denver, Queen City of the Plains, often languished in depression.

But as usual with Americans, and almost always with the West, belief shouted down the facts. "An erroneous impression has gone forth that Kansas is subject to drought," the Kansas Board of Immigration wrote in 1861, astonished at the rumors.²³ Boosters assured everyone that the mines were bottomless, cattle would have plenty to eat, and farmers had nothing to fear. Doubts dissolved. The lovely dream spread and colored nicely.

By 1876, as the republic marked its hundredth birthday and the formal reconstruction of the South drew to a close, the West was also in its final stages of re-vision. The theme of gold bound it to the Union and expressed its larger meaning. California "sits in the circle of sister States," as a Napa orator put it on

the centennial day, "her veins throbbing with gold and silver and precious metals, her heart sending out its pulsations to all lands and climes, her lap full of all good things for the healing of the nations."²⁴ The rhetorical starburst was at least as great in Colorado, born and confirmed in gold and admitted that year as the Centennial State.

The two coasts now were linked by the technology of a new age, the final connection marked appropriately with the hammering of a golden spike and the telegraphed word "Done." The hole in the center had been filled. This geographical alchemy transformed the popular image of other parts of the region as well—Montana and Idaho in the 1860s, parts of the Southwest in the 1870s and 1880s. In fact and fancy, the West was integrated into an America looking toward its second century, one that would show the terrible contradictions and self-deceptions, as well as the true possibilities, of dreams born from the rush for gold. *M*

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As gold rushes in Colorado and elsewhere in the Rocky Mountain West filled in the nation's "empty" center, Americans celebrated "The Course of Empire," as *Harper's Monthly* titled the illustration at right in its June 1867 issue (p.1). The quest for western gold brought transformation locally, even as it hastened incorporation of the Great Plains and Rockies into a national whole.

