

The Hundredth Meridian

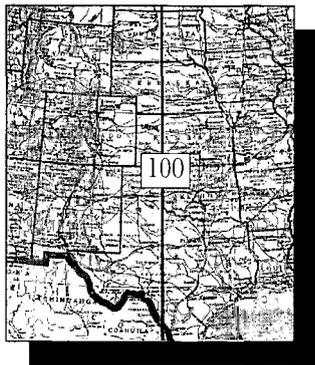
by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Getting Out of Dodge

The Founding Fathers intended the “Enumeration” (Article I, Section 2) not only as a means of assuring representational equality among the states but as a graph displaying the growth of the American nation in size and prosperity. For almost 200 years, the decennial census could plausibly be accepted as doing that. The last three censuses (those of 1980, 1990, and 2000), however, need to be seen for what they really are: The graph-paper plotting of a plot, the conspiracy of an evil and mendacious overclass to destroy both the nation and the society it controls. Census 2000 in particular is evidence that the members of the United States government no longer understand their custodial responsibility to be the welfare of their country and constituencies, but the realization of a plan so vast that the word “global” only begins to describe it.

Christ’s several parables about good and bad stewards come to mind, though if you exclude the vineyard keepers who murdered the landowner’s son, the sins involved here tend to be more of omission rather than commission. Still, stewardship is a useful standard to apply to our contemporary ruling class, since it concerns something everyone understands in a visceral way—whether we are talking about the conditions of life on a wealthy Jewish estate in Roman-occupied Palestine or in one of the sprawling new Denver suburbs—and that is livability.

An overabundance of riches of any sort is possible, including the gifts of freedom and mobility. An absentee full-time employee for the past two decades, I’ve lived where I pleased and carried my house away on my back when it no longer pleased me to remain there. Everyone I know envies me this freedom (at least they *say* they do), yet much of the time I feel like the poor little rich girl in the story. Eighteen years there, 23 months in the next place, 20 here . . . Where next? I can live anywhere I want, but where do I *really* want to live? Western towns are few and far between, and Ryder’s rates aren’t coming down any, not even following the late unpleasantness in OK City.



I’m like the ass in the fable, unable to accept the law—inevitable as that of gravity—of trade-off. Wyoming has a small population, great hunting, and no income tax. Also, little social and intellectual sophistication, no restaurants, no springtime. Colorado has all three—along with an income tax, world-class traffic jams, and about a quarter of the white population of California, *circa* 1990. New Mexico is as beautiful as Wyoming—and warmer—but it’s essentially a Third World country where native poachers have nearly exterminated all the huntable game and once-pleasant towns have been swollen to sprawling cities by immigrants from north of the Rio Grande, armed with golf clubs and cell phones. Montana—with superb trout fishing—in the last 20 years has become Hollywood-on-the-Yellowstone; Utah, a slickrock paradise where outlaws can (and recently have) disappeared without a trace (apparently for good), is a theocracy dedicated to converting the peoples of the world and gathering them all in to Deseret (in container ships, if necessary), with a wink and a nod from the INS. Obviously, I’m finicky, indecisive . . . hard to please. Nobody to blame but myself.

Recently, though, I’ve begun to suspect the choice is not finally between warm or cold, high or dry, town or city, but between Not Enough and Too Much—between one type of unliveability and another. In this sense, America, touted by enthusiasts as the most diverse nation the world has ever seen, in fact is becoming more and more a No Exit society, even as the Entry door remains jammed wide open. There’s a connection between the two, I’m betting, that bodes ill for the future of the country,

even if I can find some assurance in the thought that my malaise is not, after all, my fault.

Two related stories landed, by coincidence, on my desk the other morning. The first, printed on the front page of the State section of the *Casper Star-Tribune*, was a melancholy piece datelined Lusk, a town of 1,500 people situated 22 miles west of the Nebraska border in east-central Wyoming, whose economy is based almost exclusively on ranching and railroading. Three years ago, Microsoft aired a series of prime-time TV commercials showing Lusk in its most photogenic aspect and ending with the question, “Where do you want to go today?” The ads brought plenty of inquiries to the local chamber of commerce, but no business relocations there. Instead, a small company printing telephone faceplates for phone booths and hotels picked up and left. “They moved to Colorado because they needed high-speed Internet, overnight shipping, and everything,” the past president of the chamber explained. (And just imagine being 41 miles from the closest interstate!) “This town is better than a lot of places,” one resident told the reporter for the *Salt Lake Tribune*. “It’s quiet. People kind of let people live.” There aren’t many places left in the socially mobilized U.S. of A. you can say *that* about.

The second story, clipped from the local paper in Concordia, Kansas, arrived later in the morning from Ed Detrixhe in the neighboring town of Clyde. Entitled “Dwindling Population Hard on Small Kansas Towns,” this article was datelined Utica, a town in the western end of the state where the population continues to decline—and to age. “Every time somebody dies, we never replace them,” a farmer in his mid-60’s (whose grandfather homesteaded in the vicinity in 1878) told the AP reporter. The Utica high school will close at the end of the school year; the elementary and high schools in nearby McCracken have been gone for years. “There will always be cattle out in this part of the country,” a young female veterinarian (married to another vet) said. “Maybe fewer farmers, but the same number of cattle.” Cows let people live and let live, too.

Most of the hangers-on do so from

choice, “because you can’t beat the quality of life” in small-town America, as one young woman explained to the (probably flabbergasted) AP. If Lusk isn’t enough for you, you can move to Fort Collins, Denver, or Colorado Springs; when Utica gets wearisome and you can no longer pay for the upkeep on your grandparent’s house, the humming, unconstrained cities of Wichita, Topeka, and Manhattan are waiting with open arms to rescue you from the failing clutches of the dying American Gothic era and pull you into the posturban dreamscape, where Too Much is Never Enough. Most folks aren’t likely to be happy there, though; while postmodern Wichita and Denver are Too Much, and modern Utica and Lusk are Not Enough, there was a time in the memory of those still alive and walking about at the hoary age of 50 when Denver was Less Than Too Much, and Lusk was Just Enough. That time, however, was before current demographic and economic transformations made the destruction of the Old America, both rural and urban, a *fait accompli*.

Just because a place is unlivable doesn’t mean that no one lives there, of course, or even that no one *wishes* to do so; only that the life available is incompatible with, or contrary to, healthy human desires and needs. Having lived in one small town and one large one, a single small city as well as the Tucson behemoth, across the Rocky Mountain region north and south, I’m ready to conclude that the American West as it’s been made over by Progress during the past 30 years is, in this sense, unlivable. The small towns, no longer whole and entire communities, are like a body dependent on long-distance hookup to a major medical center in order to maintain the functions of several vital organs that have, for one reason or another, been removed. Ease of access to a metropolitan center has destroyed provincial culture—and with it a curiosity about cosmopolitan sophistication. (Small-town people visit the nearest big city to shop—and afterward buy a ticket to see a movie they can watch a few months later on HBO.) Eighty years ago, when Sinclair Lewis wrote his famous novel, it was nearly impossible, as it is today, to order a well-shaken martini, a decent bottle of wine, or a first-rate meal on Main Street; then as now, you were as unlikely to find serious conversation in a Main Street saloon as to get your whiskey free. Social life was (and is) restricted to the meager provisions of the churches and the social

and service clubs, while the resource of self-reliant talent for amateur entertainment was already beginning to erode. (Compare Laura Ingalls Wilder’s account of imaginative frontier conviviality in *Little Town on the Prairie* with Gopher Prairie’s imitative, timid, self-conscious socializing.) Provincial culture (American, British, French, Italian) is provincial culture, but thinness is not the same as incompleteness; and *incomplete* is what provincial culture is today, when small towns are no longer their own main economic, social, and recreational centers, and their political identity has grown increasingly tenuous. American towns are, in many ways, unchanged from what they were a hundred years ago, except for what they have lost over the course of a century—and what they have lost is enormous, especially their groundedness in the land that molded and sustained them. Meanwhile, hemorrhaging populations produce an imbalance in age stratification and leave the local breeding pool insufficient for natural replacement. From today’s perspective, it appears entirely plausible that Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* portrayed the American small town of the 1920’s not all that far below its zenith, rather than in its striving, ascendant stage.

You may recall that Carol Kennicott escapes Gopher Prairie to Washington, D.C., only to discover that the capital city of the American empire is . . . *the same thing, only more so*. Her mistake, of course, was to choose Washington as Gopher Prairie’s antithesis—not New York, Chicago, New Orleans, or San Francisco. (We’re talking about 1920, remember.) Still, Washington in the 1920’s was a kind of Periclean Athens compared not only with its present self but with almost every other big (no one uses the word “great” to describe our modern metropolises) American city of the 21st century, because the same economic, political, and demographic forces that ruined America’s rural communities have wrecked its urban ones as well. Industrial agriculture, “economies of size,” technological abstraction, consumerism, mass culture, mass immigration: All these phenomena, in the course of sucking population from small cities, small towns, and the countryside at large, have swelled American urban centers to such an extent that normal human life—the life of Just Enough, not Too Little or Never Enough—is impossible. Metaphorically, modern cities are medieval

princes who steal all the food their starving serfs produce and, having eaten themselves to a grotesque corpulence, suffer an apoplectic stroke and live out the remainder of their days in impaired mental and physical condition.

Unlike certain medieval princes, however, these cities lack the civilization that devolved from those princes to the bourgeoisie of the modern age, both as defunct now as the feudal system that preceded them. As late as the 1950’s, there were advantages to living in cities—for the rich, poor, and middle class alike. Today—when ethnic neighborhoods have been replaced by ghettos and Park Avenue by gated communities; Fifth Avenue by The Mall, Checker cabs by private pods (like hordes of wheeled locusts), walking by driving, sidewalks by pedestrian walkways, cocktail and supper parties by TV and the Internet, society by cocaine evenings, the delightful compaction of buildings and people characteristic of a *real* city by sprawl, eccentricity by pathology—there are no advantages, only drawbacks and liabilities, with neurosis and then madness the eventual result. A few art galleries and concert halls scattered equidistantly about an area so vast that, like Jonah’s Nineveh, it takes three days to cross it, plus a different kind of ethnic restaurant for every 300 inhabitants, simply aren’t enough to make these bones live. The postmodern American city, unlike the postmodern American town, is defined far more by what it has *gained* (that is to say, *stolen*) than by what it has lost—which is why, as far as livability goes, the two enjoy complementarity.

I thought this through long and hard before deciding it really isn’t worth packing my stuff again (for the third time in four years) and getting out of Dodge—chances being I’d end up 5,000 bucks poorer in *another* Dodge, or, worse (*much* worse), in a country boy’s nightmare like Kansas City (Hemingway’s old town) that only people from Mexico, Asia, India, Pakistan, the Middle East, Indonesia, and other foreign parts seem to find attractive nowadays. (They never knew the Old America they’re replacing and wouldn’t know what to do with it if they did.) Instead, I’ve put money down on an older house in Laramie (hardwood floors and interior trim; downstairs den with wood stove, work room for storing tack and guns as well as a place to set up a handloading bench). If life’s unlivable here, chances are the same thing goes for anywhere else I can think of to live. <

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