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## The Unrelenting Land

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JOHN DEWITT MCKEE

*The Unrelenting Land*

New Mexico answers no questions. It is as impersonal as an equation, as unpersonified as a law of physics, and more immutable. Yet not immutable at all, but ever-changing; set solid as a boulder, yet changing with the sun. The land itself sings no songs, tells no tales, will not be romanticized into prettiness. It does not give, nor does it ask.

Still we stand fascinated by the unanswered question, pulled like Ulysses to the unsung song, stretched tight to breaking toward the story that quivers forever on the brink of being. And if we are tuned, we vibrate to the unheard melody, we take the salt of wisdom from the words unspoken.

What is it then that holds us to this curious, raw, new, old and savage land? It is not love, for the land itself is too aloof for love. It is not landscape, for there is no landscape here. There is only the land, which can no more be trapped for taming than can the fleeting watermelon color of the mountains, come and gone between one eye-blink and the next. Landscapes can be whistled in and brought to heel, ordered and arranged in frames. But this! So seemingly inert, impassive, barren, this land will not submit to capture.

The land's alive. It has a tensile strength unknown in the matronly luxuriance of greener places. It has a thrusting power not found in the contented pregnancy of midland fields. This land is impassive, yes; but it is never passive. The land itself by slow degrees takes those who

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*John DeWitt McKee is author of "Two Legs To Stand On," a book published by Appleton-Century-Crofts in 1955, an excerpt from which appeared previously in Atlantic Monthly. McKee is a teaching assistant in English at the University of New Mexico. His Ph.D. thesis subject in American Studies is "William Allen White: The Respectable Rebel." Drawing by Peter Hurd from "Sky Determines," by Ross Calvin.*

come to it and shapes them till they fit, till they take the color of the desert, till they can look almost unwaveringly at the sky. This is the land then. This it is that holds us, this and the paradox.

Consider the paradox. Here is a land uncompromising in its honesty, the naked geologic ribs of earth stripped for man to try to conquer. There is about this land an unrelenting clarity whose very air would seem to make a lie impossible.

Nevertheless, a shabby falseness walks upon this land, a movie-set unreality which stems, perhaps, from insecurity and results in an intellectually self-conscious insistence that the observer take for bed-rock reality what is instead either imported veneer or artificial and mechanical resurrection.

For the culture that exists here—as opposed to the Culture which is so hopefully advertised—is a colloidal compound of traditions. Some of the traditions were here from the beginning; they grew from the earth with the Indian. Some came from Spain or Mexico, some from the Midwest, some from the South, others from New England. This land, which is like a cat and belongs to no man, has taken to itself the traditions of all of Western man. There is no culture here. There are only cultures, swirled together like many oils of different weights, on water.

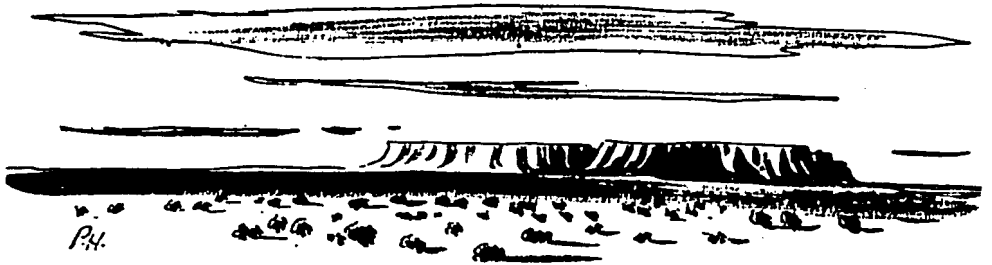
What stands for culture here, however, makes much of Culture. It shows off like a boy walking a board fence. It takes inordinate pride in its success in blending “three cultures,” by which it means the Indian, the Spanish, and every other culture of which the New Mexican is compounded, which it lumps as “Anglo.”

As for blending, we’ve taken the architecture of the Pueblo Indian, which grew out of earth and necessity and remained a part of the land, and we’ve built things of steel and hollow tile and cement blocks, adding useless mass because that mass is a part of the appearance of Pueblo architecture, and we’ve called it “modified Pueblo.” We’ve hung dubious Navajo blankets in front of roadside “snake pits” to draw the tourist trade, and we’ve provided places where you can “watch the Indians work,” like queer fish in a waterless aquarium, while they make for you “authentic” Indian jewelry.

Here Society seems somehow transplanted, too—like an orchid in the desert—unreal, pretentious, self-conscious. Adolescent Albuquerque, the biggest city in New Mexico, its nerve center, its cultural hub, goes

into the world of after-dark wearing green mascara and falsies and sophistication.

Here individuality has become a cult, demanding a sort of conformity in non-conformity. There is pride in being an artistic center, a literary center, a meeting place for intellectuals. But it is a defensive pride. New Mexico is not unique in this. It is, in fact, a national phenomenon which began in colonial days. But the poseur is the more obvious because the works of man, dabbed impertinently upon the face of agelessness, ephemeral everywhere, seem even more so here.



The organized individualists decry the decline of taste, and write and paint and think in circles, to be read and viewed and discussed in the closed circle of the organization, creating a sort of artistic and intellectual hoop snake with its tail in its mouth. Nothing can succeed, apparently, unless it is organized. One must “belong” to dance the square dance, to grow a beard, to appreciate poetry, to love horses, or to learn to unsex the Chinese elm. Recreation itself is organized and departmentalized and loaded with people who have been especially trained to organize it and departmentalize it.

Neither is this a provincial nor a regional matter. It is nationwide, and it goes beyond the arts and recreation. The plumbers, the morticians, the service station attendants, the bakers, the bottlers, the meat packers, the dry cleaners, the model builders, the philatelists, the hi-fi addicts—name your group. It is a group, complete with president, vice president, secretary and treasurer.

Perhaps no man can any longer face the immensity and complexity of the land alone. Perhaps the idea of "teamwork"—in medicine, in advertising, in religion, in nearly every human endeavor—is a necessary weapon with which to combat fear. And perhaps the very insistence on organization has generated a fear of being alone. If the soul needs solitude as the tree needs room to grow, we may be afraid to grow. For even if we pride ourselves on being different, we surround ourselves, for protection, with others who are being different in like manner.

The group is everywhere, but here it is more obvious, being naked. Against this land, beneath this sky, men gather under banners to give necessary meaning to themselves. Much is made of diversity, and there is diversity in plenty. But it is group, not individual, diversity. It is self-conscious diversity, supported by organization for its own sake. It does not have the integrity that makes differentness incidental. Only from an honest and unpretentious expression of self can grow, paradoxically, a fundamental unity. And from that unity can grow a culture that fits like a loose jacket, with no necessity to call attention to itself. The culture here, on the other hand, binds the swelling chest of its own self-consciousness.

There is a reason for this, too. American society has always been fluid, always moving, always looking for the new frontier. And here is the last of the frontiers. This land which is old is yet so new. What was a somnolent village yesterday may be a bursting city today, with the stink of boom about it. There is space to move here. The new frontiersmen see the space, the sky and the mesa, the desert and the forest, but they are baffled by the land that under-girds them. Or they ignore it.

The artist deprecates, and is deprecated by, the businessman; the scientist jostles the cattleman; the intellectual shouts baffled imprecations from his tower; and the features of the Indian become more and more blurred as he becomes more and more "assimilated" and helps the white man carry his burden. The dances, the legends, the art, and the religion of the Indian are already being mummified and preserved in the collection cases of the "tradition" hunters.

And here they place a tradition in an iron lung and will not let it die a decent death. They build an association around it to give pneumatic similitude of life to the tradition, and busyness to minds besieged by boredom. They do not realize that when it is pumped up and preserved in associations and annual meetings, it is as false as the seeming blush of life on the rouged face of a corpse. They fail to see, for instance, that the strength of aesthetic pleasure in folk arts is rooted in the

absolute material and spiritual necessity of those arts. They do not realize, for example, that the conglomeration which passes for Spanish Colonial or modified Pueblo, because it is cut off from the roots of aesthetic and pragmatic necessity, is bastard architecture. The fiesta dress, on the other hand, is in a tradition and is alive. It is alive because it is aesthetically pleasing, and it is practical. So far as architecture is concerned, a new tradition may arise in the Southwest out of the growing practicality of solar heating. These things can become and remain traditions because they grow out of the needs of the people on the land and out of the land itself.

It is fascinating, this New Mexico, and the paradox is no less fascinating than the land. But one can only explore. New Mexico gives no answers. It is a grinding, clashing, many-cornered conglomerate. It is cattle and oil and cotton; it is mines and pines and mountains. It has, in spite of all the unconscious attempts to spoil it, a fine, firm honesty, like the uncompromising, harsh beauty of the malpais. But it wears a coy curtain of posing, poster-paint culture, much like the flapping canvas come-on of a carnival sideshow. The backdrop is real; the show itself is not; for behind the curtain is still the same hula girl from Keokuk.

Yet the land holds us and shoves our roots hard and deep into the rock beneath the shifting sand. The sky holds us, curved tight above the land like the blue bubble of a bomber. And the scything wind-sweeps of the cattle-dotted grasslands; the dust-blown, curving plow tracks in the cotton fields in winter, and the nodding, waving whiteness of the same fields in the fall; the oil pumps, singly or in ranks, sucking nectar from the earth like metal mantises, living to devour—these hold us and mark this place as home. Rising out of long forgotten seas like a massive shrug of shoulders, the mountains stand firm and hold us. Volcanic cones against the sky, monuments to the grandeur of past violence, hold us, too, in something that approaches awe.

Man may scratch the past with his frail stick plow. He may fling himself into the future seeking limits to the limitless sky. He may strut upon a stage too vast for any drama he may make or comprehend. It does not matter. It is the land that holds us here. It is the unrelenting land, this great, fierce, challenging, canyon-gutted, mesa-muscle land, which holds us and which gives us space enough to write a life on—and leaves it to us whether we have courage enough and faith to fill the page.