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Note to readers: I am sharing what is ultimately a book project with you at its very beginning. What follows is a record of observation, experience and reflection regarding a complicated and multiply endangered place. Directions that archival and contextual work might take depend in some measure on what you see as important and intriguing here, and I thank you in advance for reading it.

Beautiful Wreck: A Red Desert View of Ruin in Wyoming

1. “No Trespassing By The Owners”

Even glimpsed at eighty miles an hour from the highway, the sign is impressive. A tumbled heap of lumber capped by its own fallen roof fronts Interstate 80 in the tiny town called Red Desert. A huge piece of white plywood with hand-painted letters announces: No Trespassing By the Owners. It would be easy, but ungenerous, to see the sign as merely local color. This articulate ruin is a good image for the desert neighborhood at large and people’s relationship to it. Aimed at travelers through the town and the desert, the sign broadcasts the presence of owners; the hand lettering identifies these owners as local people rather than a land management agency or a corporation. The sign is crabby, big enough to suggest that trespassing has been a problem in the past, and that the trespassers are those passing through, maybe curious about someone else’s evident failure, maybe thinking they had stumbled onto the “Old West.” The building’s collapse is

both a monument and a cautionary tale: don't build too much here. But the owners have not abandoned it, even if they can't live or do business in it. Their territory is broader than the fallen building, and certainly includes living and making a living somewhere; but the ruin and its sign announces the owners' claim in the present, however obscure. The logic of this sign and its tangled wreckage is, I think, a useful logic in understanding what the Red Desert is, and what is endangered about it in the face of increasing attention in the form of both accelerating oil and gas development and environmentalist advocacy.

The Red Desert is the 2.5-million-acre basin enclosed by the continental divide in Wyoming. The Great Divide Basin, or simply "the desert," are other names for the same place. On a map, it is the big empty space through which Interstate 80 passes, east-west, from Rawlins to Rock Springs. The basin extends north almost to South Pass, the route over the continental divide at the end of the Wind River Mountains. A shallow dip south past the interstate takes in a small area of Colorado. Precipitation in the basin averages between seven and ten inches a year, most as snow. Its soils are alkaline, its plant cover sparse or nonexistent. Eroded badlands like Honeycomb Buttes and Adobe Town are landmarks of the region, where nothing grows. The highest and most active portions of the Killpecker Sand Dunes are clean wind-blown sand. Desert areas where precipitation might be as low as six inches a year lie outside the basin, but adjacent to it, uncannily (and incompletely) transformed by a Bureau of Reclamation project into farms in the Eden Valley. With the exception of tiny privately owned inholdings and railroad sections near the interstate, almost all of the desert is Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. There are few towns in the basin (Wamsutter, Red Desert, Point of Rocks), and these lie on the interstate. Some highway exits to named places—Patrick Draw, for example—lead primarily to Wyoming Department of

Transportation buildings and equipment, and the housing provided for state employees there. The desert is home to antelope, elk, sage grouse, horned larks and horned toads, as well as wild horses; it is prime hunting territory in the fall. Great pockets of natural gas lie beneath its surface.

The Red Desert is an archive of human and animal lives scattered atop visible layers of geologic time. It is beautiful, in a way that people have come to embrace relatively recently, an austere landscape where eyes trained to look for the sublime can only attempt to take in a windy expanse, or settle on immediately detailed textures of soil, animal, plant, or trash. It is a palimpsest of ventures, many abandoned. The desert shouts and whispers transience. Passing through the desert is arguably one of its oldest uses; staying there is a measure of failure of some kind, except for the close habitats of plants and smaller animals. The desert's status as BLM land is itself an artifact of the failure of homesteading on arid lands, where private ownership faltered, and the government withdrew land into a new management agency in the mid-twentieth century. Homes and outbuildings painstakingly built of heavy logs brought from an inconvenient distance of at least twenty miles stand empty, like the dry impoundment pits intended to hold water for stock. At the same time, elk and antelope stay, though some may have wintered in the desert and summered farther upcountry (maybe, for the elk, as far north as Jackson, but at least as far north as the Wind River Mountains); habitat and migration-corridor fragmentation keeps many of these animals in the desert more permanently.

My quandary has been how to best understand, and indeed use, this region. Others use it daily. Looking in on its fraught history is itself a form of extraction, for personal gain, and yet like all users I think this use may be important to a broader public. The oil and gas boom happening in the Red Desert now is a continuation of forces at work throughout the state over the last hundred

and fifty years at least. This whole history is visible; every boom that swept Wyoming left its traces and trash on this desert. The state and the desert are poster children for the failure of economic diversification, at the mercy of the next boom and its inevitable collapse.

The grinding process of resource exploitation is predictable; by now, a swift environmentalist response is likewise predictable. Bush Administration energy policy gave Interior Secretary Gale Norton the green light for mineral development on public lands in Wyoming and the West, pouring a windfall of mineral royalty money into Wyoming since 2001. Contemporary ruin is what activists fear in the accelerating development of mineral resources in the desert. Most current environmentalist rhetoric about the Red Desert focuses on its wilderness qualities—the “rare desert elk herd,” the wild horses, sage grouse, and antelope, and the roadlessness of some of its areas. I am suspicious of prevailing understandings of the Red Desert, as unspoiled landscape and as mineral resource (whether either view acknowledges multiple uses of this landscape or not); neither view is especially well informed, historically, or leaves much room for the local lives whose territories encompass the desert (and its industries), whether they own any of the land outright or not.

There isn't a boom industry that has not actually continued in some form into the present—diminished, but persistent. When the current oil and gas boom ends, as all booms do, the landscape will be littered with a new layer of artifacts—roads and drill pads. Most of the people and the money, and maybe many elk and sage grouse, will be gone. And yet something, and someone, will remain behind.

2. Boom and Bust (and Boom)

Wyoming's economy takes shape in the sharp rhythm of industries that flourish and crash: railroad construction in the 1860s, stock raising in the 1880s, mineral production in waves (gold, coal, oil, gas, uranium) since the mid-nineteenth century. The recorded booms created the more or less permanent entity known as Wyoming, and the busts continually threaten to undermine its economy, its systems of education, and the health of its citizens. In one sense, this is the reality of capitalism anywhere. In Wyoming, a lack of economic diversification allows this cycle to rip through landscapes and communities with breathtaking visibility.

At the same time, busts in extractive industries are in a sense paradoxically good—not for communities and the economy, but for Wyoming's image as a wide-open, undeveloped landscape, preserving land and wildlife species, which in turn invite tourists to look and to hunt (and to spend) but not to stay. A local desire to keep people out of the state may reflect more than provincial narrow-mindedness: what have big ideas done for Wyoming exactly? Dependence on federal money while resenting outsiders' expert notions does not seem contradictory to me. I have argued elsewhere that Wyoming was not simply backward in developing a variety of stable industries, but had been created as a backwater of resource extraction and scenic preservation by the very industrialization that produced the wealth of cities like Denver, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Metropolitan areas had the factories, capital, and transportation infrastructure, and populations hungry for scenery; Wyoming had the goods, in coal, oil and gas, and in Yellowstone Park. And the artists and writers came, too, looking nostalgically for the West, seizing on the "cowboy" (as vanishing hero), setting a precedent for generations of Americans to understand Wyoming as a place where a few people lived in an imagined past, where landscapes were unspoiled. Whether

either of these things is true or not, Wyoming residents have had to live with these impressions a long time, even as they weathered a harsh climate and economy that all outsiders can leave behind. What Wyoming historian T.A. Larson heard decades ago—that there are plenty of people in Wyoming, thank you very much—I heard in the small town of Farson last week.

Professional writers and historians in Wyoming routinely debunk myths: that the cowboy era was either long or remarkable; that the state’s residents are uniformly white; that agriculture is a mainstay of the state’s economy; that the “equality state” has been especially welcoming to immigrants, women’s political participation, or the presence of gay and lesbian people; that Wyoming residents are “independent,” particularly of the federal government. Sam Western’s recent book, Pushed Off the Mountain, Sold Down the River: Wyoming’s Search for its Soul (2002), argues that all such myths, rooted in versions of the mythic West, paralyze efforts to imagine a state that can prosper and grow enough to inure the economy against the next downturn in mineral revenue. Recognizing the perilous reality of mineral extraction as the state’s true life source, there is no shortage of critics now clamoring for decreasing dependency on mineral extraction in order to sustain more livable communities in the state over a longer period of time. Boom and bust is no way to live. The cycle has ruined lives and livelihoods (as well as landscapes and ecosystems) since territorial days.

And yet people do hang on. This has been true in and around the Red Desert for over a hundred years, when prices for cattle and sheep were good, and then bad, and waves of mineral development filled and emptied small edge towns around the basin. What seems remarkable to me is that so much of the boom past in and around the Red Desert is not only still visible, but still marginally functional. This may not be as true after the current wave of oil and gas production is

spent.

Gold mines brought thousands of miners to the hills around South Pass City and Atlantic City in the 1860s. The rush did not last but gold mining continued, with dredges operating in the creeks around Atlantic City through the 1940s. People raised and educated children, and did business for residents as well as tourists. Atlantic City could support a local school as recently as the 1960s. The hills cradling these small towns are visibly marked by their mining past. Timbered and bare pits lurk in hillsides and on level ground, and the sheds of the big old mines cascade precipitously downhill. Gravel tailings left by the dredges line the creek beds. Carloads of people come to see the mining ghost towns every summer, along with their forays along the Oregon Trail and into the desert. That abandoned mines are environmental and safety hazards is clear; cyanide poured into low-quality ore to isolate the gold still lies in the ground in some places, and you don't want to fall into an unmarked or uncovered pit by accident. But the junk left behind works its way into local life all the same: mid-twentieth century residents remember abundant raspberries in the dredge tailings when they were new. The state of Wyoming is counting on tourists to help justify its recent purchase of the Carissa Mine near South Pass City; federal Abandoned Mine Lands funds made the purchase possible, And the gold mining isn't over. Steve Gyorvary, former caretaker of the Carissa before it became part of the South Pass Historic Site, is himself a gold miner, operating his own Mary Ellen mine nearby. Not knowing how serious his venture was, I asked him once what he got out of it. Leaning close to my face, he growled with as much play as menace, "That depends." Believe it or not, large-scale gold prospecting has returned, in the form of a Canadian company, Fremont Gold Company, who plans to dig test pits for gold near South Pass City. Plus ça change...

This pattern of layered, recurrent booms, lingering residence, and the trash of each wave, is characteristic of Red Desert towns and landscapes. Jeffrey City hosted a uranium boom at Green Mountain—part of the desert’s rim—in the 1970s, until the accident at Three Mile Island removed the market for uranium. Like gold at South Pass, uranium mining could resume and bring miners back to Jeffrey City if the market returns. Meanwhile, though, at least South Pass and Atlantic City are picturesque, if a little rough. Jeffrey City shows more clearly the spent waste of boom town life, perhaps because its convulsion is more recent. Plywood siding of the hastily built workers’ apartments and barracks peels green paint; a practically brand new school stands empty. Many buildings from Jeffrey City were moved to Lander after the boom. One building, a bar, moved to Atlantic City. It is called the Dredge, bringing threads of boom and bust history close together in the life of one modest and mobile building.

Oil and gas drilling may represent a break with this pattern of marginally livable ruin that follows some mineral’s dazzling career. Drilling in the desert itself has been continuous since the mid-twentieth century, but not on a scale that could transform this multiple-use federal empire wholesale into an oil or gas field exclusively.

The Jonah Field farther north, at Pinedale, represents the scale of change possible when one use overtakes all others and intends to stay a long time, possibly as long as thirty years. Many companies send their semi-trailer trucks and pickups up and down the highway, but Halliburton is clearly a major presence in Rock Springs; the signature red grills and toolboxes of Halliburton fleet trucks crowd Highway 191 in both directions. This highway connects the busy gas field with Rock Springs, and workers with laundries, restaurants, and watering holes in otherwise very small farming towns like Farson and Eden. One of my students, Elizabeth Davis, completed her master’s

thesis on the Jonah Field last spring. She found the mining landscape hostile and visually almost incomprehensible. Nominally public land, the Jonah Field is a highly industrialized and crowded area in which a picnic, or trolling for interesting rocks or plants, much less a hunting trip, is simply not possible. Elizabeth documented the fences, valved pipelines and safety warning signs with almost breathless disbelief. The Jonah Field almost all by itself launched the state into an era of unprecedented budget surpluses. As the money started pouring in, the state anticipated a \$400 million surplus in 2003. That has increased to over \$2 billion in 2006.

In 2001, Bush Administration Interior Secretary Gale Norton emphasized energy development on BLM land, fanning oil and gas development already under way throughout the state. The activity of the Jonah Field catapulted the Rawlins and Rock Springs field offices of the BLM into a flurry of planning, as the mineral companies snapped up leases, outstripping the BLM's ability to even monitor (much less limit) effects of new drilling in its territory (and with no evident encouragement to do so from Washington). These two BLM field offices administer much of the land in the southern half of Wyoming, and almost all the mineral estate that lies beneath the surface of otherwise private land within their boundaries.

Both BLM planners and environmentalists began turning anxious, expectant attention to the Red Desert when the Rock Springs office of the BLM released a draft Environmental Impact Statement in 2001 on what it calls the Jack Morrow Hills (JMH). The real Jack Morrow Hills are a landscape feature, part of the basin's southwestern boundary. The federal Jack Morrow Hills include part of the western desert basin but significantly most of the historic sites in the area around South Pass and the Oregon Trail, which are not in the basin, and many miles from the real Jack Morrow Hills. The name chosen for the planning area has become a point of speculation on

the part of environmental groups—the BLM did not name the area “Oregon Buttes,” or “South Pass,” which would have drawn more immediate attention to the area’s historical significance.

The Rawlins office of the BLM had completed a Resource Management Plan (RMP) in 1990 for what it then called the “Great Divide” planning area, which includes the rest of the Red Desert in Wyoming, though fewer nationally famous landmarks and historic sites than the JMH. By 1998, the Great Divide RMP was out of date. More mineral leases had been awarded than the office anticipated in the late 1980s, and the National Wildlife Federation and the Wyoming Wildlife Federation had formally protested the plan for failing to protect sensitive wildlife habitat in the area. The Rawlins BLM field office started a new round of planning in 2001, and renamed their project the Rawlins Resource Management Plan, again choosing a name that undercuts the broad recognizability of its planning area beyond local communities. The BLM’s preferred alternatives for both the JMH and the Great Divide/Rawlins RMP included developing many new gas wells, with an obligatory nod to wildlife and ecosystem health, and the uses of the area for hunting and tourism.

The period of public comment that followed the release of the JMH plan in particular put the Red Desert in the news media regularly. Awareness of and interest in the Red Desert has grown dramatically. No fewer than three masters’ theses at the University of Wyoming on the Red Desert began in 2005, one by my student Kelley Gove in American Studies. She and Elizabeth Davis (working on the Jonah Field) understood their projects to be closely related—before and after portraits, focusing on the contestation of images, meanings, uses and possible futures of these places. I didn’t instigate this interest; a sense of urgency to understand and write about mining landscapes and the Red Desert is simply in the air now. The BLM received thousands of

comments on the JMH plan, in part motivated by the ambitious work of local organizations, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and the Wyoming Outdoor Council. These organizations wrote what they astutely called a “Western Heritage Alternative” to complement the BLM’s plans, allowing for drilling on a more limited scale, and giving more emphasis to the area’s wildlife, Native sacred sites, and historic sites than they thought the BLM did. The BLM has not endorsed the Western Heritage alternative.

Gas drilling is poised to change the Red Desert, though probably not as thoroughly as it has the Jonah Field. New wells will number in the hundreds rather than thousands, and the close spacing of wells in the Jonah Field may never appear in the Red Desert; the desert isn’t as valuable a “play.”

But drilling has already changed the basin town of Wamsutter, where young men rest their heads after their twelve-hour shifts on new wells. Basin gas will flow through a new pipeline from Wamsutter, and construction crews fill brand-new motels in Laramie and Rawlins. The boom is visible in the construction sites, well pads, roads, and towns; it is palpable in the busy construction and overdue maintenance of state buildings, including on the University of Wyoming campus in Laramie. Our renovated football field was promptly renamed the Jonah Field, and a bizarre parade float sporting the “Christmas tree” of brightly painted pipes and valves that caps a finished gas well has advertised the wealth of the gas field at spots near campus for two years. Natural gas revenue helped the state rapidly fill the new Hathaway Scholarship fund that will guarantee almost any Wyoming high school graduate with a grade point average of 3.8 and fairly rigorous high school courses a place at the University of Wyoming or one of the state’s community colleges. Hathaway students are coming to campus this fall.

It is impossible not to marvel at the optimism of a state sorely in need of revenue; it is likewise impossible not to hear, already, the wrenching damage of the boom. Wildlife biologists do not know exactly how drilling will affect habitat and the movements of herds of animals or the availability of mating grounds for sage grouse, though they have a pretty good idea. Radio-collar data on how deer, elk, or antelope move through the desert is being collected only now, as the new drilling is underway. Methamphetamine use—already a significant problem in Wyoming—is an acute problem in the oil and gas fields. Poaching has increased in these areas as well. And concentrated populations of young male workers in places like Pinedale and Wamsutter do not constitute functional communities. It isn't surprising that this tense and dangerous moment would attract the attention of novelist Annie Proulx, a maven of rural ruin from Newfoundland to the Oklahoma panhandle. Her story, "The Wamsutter Wolf," in her recent collection of Wyoming stories called Bad Dirt (2004), describes as sordid a domestic interior as imaginable, replete with misplaced testosterone, child abuse, reckless sex and too much alcohol. The amazing thing about booms and busts is that writers can capitalize on either, as they have in Wyoming since Owen Wister gave us the *Virginian*.

Permanent ruin seems immanent, an occasion to understand how or why this happened, and maybe grieve as well. Looking more closely both at what a desert is, culturally, as well as how the Red Desert might function as such a desert, may allow us to see something we might not otherwise notice in the glare of conflict, dread and damage.

3. Errands in the Desert.

Deserts are culturally important places. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “desert” itself means abandoned, deserted, left waste. Possibly, one might imagine, ruined. In any case, “desert” is a social or cultural descriptor, not an environmentally specific one, though dry difficult places are more likely to be deserted than lush river valleys or fertile upcountry meadows. Woods, swamps and mountain heights could all be “deserts,” along with abandoned ruins of people’s lives in the recent or remote past. Latinate languages of Europe extended the “desert” of the swamp or mountain fastness to arid lands outside Europe, all hostile spaces that might harbor liminal, mobile people beyond permanent settlement—nomads, outlaws, and solitary hermits, but also visionaries or prophets, at least temporarily. Deserts have been perhaps necessary vacancies on the cultural landscape for the occasional spiritual errand. The American vision of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young combined both agrarian ambition and desert wandering in the same errand. On a secular plane but seared into the national saga, so did the overland emigration of farmers headed to Washington, Oregon, or California, boots powdered with alkali and bentonite on the long walk over South Pass. If an encounter with wilderness transformed a European into an American, the overland emigrants encountered the wilderness on the road, like a pilgrimage or an exodus, giving narrative shape to a deeply Anglo-American myth through traversed space, not just transformed places like forests or prairies.

One error in thinking about the desert may be that it is the hot and dusty version of forests and mountains, left behind and untouched, the same error as thinking about “wilderness” as pristine only because some timbered slope or backcountry wetland has not (yet) sprouted wheat, cows, oil, or condos. People have used and shaped prairies and forests as well as arid lands for a long time. It is possible that what distinguishes a desert from other culturally significant but located

(including developed) places—fields, cities, villages, temples, woods, pastures—is that it presents a physical route to someplace else, spiritually as well as materially. The swamp may be another such place, as Megan Kate Nelson suggests in her recent book on the Okefenokee Swamp, Trembling Earth (2005). African Americans and Seminoles, as well as later white settlers, used the swamp as a refuge and route to freedom; its ultimate “protection” as a wild wetland preserved water, trees, and wildlife, but not its long human use as a way to get around, or a source of limited local resources.

It may not be climate but wayfarers that make deserts. The desert, or more precisely, time spent in the desert, is the road and not the destination, a process and not an outcome. Such a desert could be anywhere, ecologically speaking: the long trail, the pilgrimage, the hunt, from which one emerges changed or revealed, or simply nourished.

The roads of the Red Desert suggest that this place is not (just) a location. It is the open road of the Red Desert, as much as its identifiable (but always nonhuman) wilderness qualities in any given spot, that is threatened by development. This is true of Native as well as non-Native uses of the desert, and human as well as nonhuman trails through it. The roads of the Red Desert literally underscore its connected human and nonhuman histories as “desert,” the unsettling and long traverse.

Herds of elk and antelope have trailed through the Red Desert for thousands of years. They forage in the south of their range in the winter, and head north into the mountains for summer range. Male elk start bugling in September as herds come downcountry, their clear eerie calls rolling through foothills and creek meadows after dark. Petroglyphs at White Mountain near Rock Springs depict these animals, in the vicinity of a migration corridor which was also a corridor for

hunters, warriors, and traders, through a place now called Indian Gap. The trail is not fully mapped in an Anglo-American sense, at least not as an “Indian” trail. The Bureau of Land Management acknowledges the need to protect visible portions of the trail as a cultural resource, and puts an asterisk on a spot on their map of “Heritage Resources” in the area, but asterisking a thoroughfare seems simpleminded and inadequate. What the BLM calls Highway 483 is known on other maps as “Freighter Gap Road,” leading to the same gap between the Jack Morrow Hills and Essex Mountain, meeting roads following Jack Morrow Creek down the western side of the gap. Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone people still visit the gap; in 2003, the Eagle Staff Runners from the Wind River Reservation in central Wyoming ran and camped from Fort Washakie, on the reservation, through Indian Gap to Steamboat Mountain on the western edge of the basin.

Fred Chapman, longtime State Historic Preservation expert and liaison with Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people in Wyoming, says elders of both groups described the Red Desert as a no-man’s land before European contact. The territories of these people, among others, met and overlapped there. Like the Okefenokee Swamp, this no-man’s land was a recognized battleground as well as a thoroughfare. Almost no one ever attempted to live in the basin full-time.

Game animals and hunters move north and south, primarily; most recent and well-traveled routes go east and west. Commercial flights across the mid-continental “flyover zone” follow the Wyoming-Colorado border fairly closely, from which you can see the red of the Red Desert below, if you spot the shift from irrigated Nebraska up the narrow ridge of the Laramie Mountains, to the drop into the basin a hundred miles west. Nineteenth-century ground travelers pushed

handcarts or drove wagons over South Pass to Utah or points west. Tourists, travelers and freighters got from Rawlins to Rock Springs on the Union Pacific railroad, or the Lincoln Highway, or now Interstate 80. This summer a new pipeline nestles in green segments against raw ditchbanks along the same I-80/Lincoln Highway/Union Pacific corridor; when completed and buried, the pipeline will carry natural gas from Wamsutter to Ohio, a distance of some 1600 miles. On a large scale, the desert is an expanse to move through, after herds or enemies, to green farms, to some city.

Travel characterizes uses of the basin and its immediate neighborhood on a smaller scale as well. The desert is marked by a loose hatch of roads and innumerable game trails that are relics of past and present use by tourists, ranchers, students, hunters, scientists, miners, and animals. Sometimes, when a two-track road gives out in the middle of the greasewood, a single trail goes farther, to water or forage or quick flight, for animals. Roads connect grazing leases, mining claims, scenic attractions, and hunting areas to each other and the main highways that border the basin. Slim trails of recently crushed sagebrush or vivid lines of tread in soft soil occasionally show inventive if illegal attempts to get somewhere. Roads following seismographic mineral exploration decades ago remain good routes for those seeking antelope or arrowheads or favorite plants; so is the abandoned gravel railroad bed that used to carry U.S. Steel's Atlantic City ore through the desert to Utah. The mine closed in 1983, and the railroad's tracks and ties (and some trestles) have been removed, but the old grade is firm and nearly continuous for dozens of miles.

Many travelers come in organized groups for a variety of purposes, including the Eagle Staff runners I mentioned earlier. The National Outdoor Leadership School based in Lander sends its students into the desert (as they do into the Wind River mountains) to practice their skills. The

University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska send wildlife biology and geology students into the desert for summer field studies. Local environmental groups conduct whirlwind didactic tours; for several summers, Laramie's Biodiversity Conservation Alliance has led caravans of would-be advocates to Boar's Tusk (a volcanic core), Killpecker Dunes, and other scenic artifacts within twenty miles or so of Rock Springs on the western edge of the region (and within the BLM's designated "Jack Morrow Hills" planning area).

It would be impossible to document all the more solitary errands in this desert. People walk or ride (horses or trucks), hunting or looking, courting, working or escaping work. A coyote hunter with a small plane may be as likely to take his buddies up over the badlands as ply his trade. There are no doubt many kinds of spiritual errands that take people into the desert alone. Local people's territories take in a wide swath of central and western Wyoming, for firewood, game, livestock pasture, and fish, as well as solitude or prayer, and work in the oil and gas fields or in the small towns around the edges of the desert basin. If the land is multiple-use, so are the people.

And so are the roads. Some roads, like that through Indian Gap, are tourist attractions as well as sacred sites. Contemporary members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints reenact their predecessors' treacherous handcart crossings of the Sweetwater River and South Pass every summer. The trail itself—the path of the Pony Express, and Oregon and California emigrants as well as Mormons—is a federally recognized historic site visible and navigable for many miles.

The shared nature of that trail, and the fact that anyone can still drive on it, underscores a particular problem of the Red Desert as a space of traverse: Who can lay claim to a place that is a route? The desert's oldest and perhaps most sustainable use may be as no-man's land, which nevertheless acknowledges people's limited uses of it, including especially its roads. Not in the

least roadless, maybe the Red Desert can remind us, not what wilderness is, but what a desert is: a special place of temporary access, as deeply human as it is “wild,” where human use and presence is not an intrusion, even if it is not permanent.

4. Directional Drilling and Ambivalence

I came to the Red Desert in 2001, following the plant collection efforts of a botanist I was writing about (Aven Nelson, of the University of Wyoming) who had gone there looking for forage plants early in his career in 1897. His was the errand of a public servant sustaining the ranching efforts of rural people. I knew little about the desert, and it was a hard place to work—hot and windy, with a penetrating solitude whose discomfort surprised me. I did not belong there in any sense. I wasn’t a botanist (or a geologist, wildlife biologist, or mineral engineer), I wasn’t a hunter or horsewoman. I knew nobody who lived there. I couldn’t even camp there; I stayed in a campground near Atlantic City and drove into the desert daily. When I finished writing about Aven Nelson in 2003, I knew I wanted to write about the Red Desert somehow; I considered a field guide. As I noted the rising tide of interest in the Red Desert, I put that project aside. What was a field guide? An invitation to go there. Such an invitation, I realized, would have to be very carefully framed.

The local Biodiversity Conservation Alliance was already ferrying people to the desert to see it for themselves, sparking a connection and commitment they might not otherwise acknowledge. BCA spokespeople gave passionate and scientifically informed presentations in Laramie and to other audiences; the accompanying slideshow featured antelope, sage grouse, wild

horses, and desert elk, and beautiful photographs of vistas described as roadless (in at least one of which I could see the tell-tale straight line of sagebrush indicating a road just out of sight). The fieldtrips and slides are intended to motivate people to action on behalf of the desert ecosystem, and the right to enjoy that ecosystem unspoiled by mineral production—valuable goals. But I was surprised at the lack of historical understanding in the environmentalist rhetoric and handouts, though BCA is supremely attentive to conservation-biology terminology and research. Wild horses are simply wild, with no history in the twentieth century. (It is not uncommon for people to believe the wild horses are descendents of Spanish conquistadors' mounts; they are much more likely to be descendents of former U.S. Cavalry horses and ranch horses abandoned during the 1920s and 1930s). Elk had no migratory past (or present), though the history of elk populations in the state is very complex and not completely known, and local residents claim they see at least some elk migrations out of the desert. The BCA evinced a convenient if sincerely felt focus on Native American sacred sites and petroglyphs. But they and other advocates neglected the desert as a rural landscape—one inhabited, if fitfully, marginally, or unsuccessfully, by more recent residents. The desert was worth protecting because it was deserted, unspoiled; it is neither.

I imagined a corrective, then—a bona fide environmental history. That may ultimately be the route I take, but I am not certain. In 2005, I put my desert materials aside and tried to figure out how it was that writing about this place was beginning to trouble me deeply.

A few years' distance from the impulse to write something, coupled with a lot of decidedly non-intellectual time spent in fossil beds, irrigating canals, badlands and game habitat plus a few kitchens in the region, made the issue more clear. The desert and its surroundings are materially and intimately part of my life. There is no not using it, so long as I drive through it, or heat my

house with natural gas, or continue to make sure my scattered family is together some of the time. My youngest daughter's father lives in Farson, though I don't; she was born in 2004, and all of our territories overlap in the desert, and in the convoluted landscape of love and distance that is our own lives. It is the human presence in the desert that I am drawn to, bringing ideological and historical tensions into sharp relief. None of the enterprises that have touched the desert have gone away. There is no neat divide between a "historic" period of settlement and the present. And new mining, which threatens what rural qualities remain in the desert, as well as its purported wilderness qualities, brings money to desert border towns and takes rural boys out of them.

Writing about the desert uses it. Whether it is a damaging extractive use depends on the writer's care and scope, not unlike the mining taking place in and near the desert now. Singleminded focus on getting all of a resource that there is may resemble the most damaging approach—a writerly or scholarly version of open pit mining or the close drilling of the Jonah Field, which will leave remarkable artifacts behind, but deform the broader character of the place, the lives of people who are close to it, and even the writer's own relationship to it. Allegedly environmentally friendly directional drilling might provide a more gentle metaphor for a writer's task: getting what you want by going down through one entrance, tapping a resource (materials for a history, an explanation) in many directions underground, leaving a smaller trace of having been there. In my case, I could tap the deep geology of archives without eating an antelope, or helping set a recently-moved outbuilding on new pilings among the prickly pear, or suffering the uncomfortable visibility of my Subaru to people who would recognize it. Without conflict but also without commitment, or connection outside the project at hand. Such writing would be mining all the same. Directional drilling is an image of ambivalence. It's like saying you are not doing what

you are in fact doing: using, taking, but pretending you have no impact, and no other business there.

Whatever approach this work eventually takes, I want to make sure the desert and I, and the people I know there, can live with it. I suspect roads will figure prominently. It is hard to say what image could best capture the feel and fate of the place, its having been used and used and used, and still beautiful. Not untouched, not perfect, not tame. Pick a feature—the cans rusting, the herds flying over open steppe, the sage grouse hidden until the last minute before clapping in flight, the line of a rifle shot bringing down an animal, the gas well going down into sandstone to bring up something immensely valuable, the inscrutable tangle of dusty roads, the sharp menace of greasewood thorns ready to puncture a tire and leave you there long enough to appreciate (again) that you can't stay, how tenuous your arrival is—any one of these realities suggests an approach, an understanding, both of what the place is and someone's relationship to it. I think, not for the first time: The desert is not an object. It is not even a habitat. What it is has something to do with what it is to all the beings who might be there, but not contained there—intermingled territories, histories, conflicts, passages, flights.

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Issues regarding the Red Desert and current mineral development and conflict in Wyoming, including maps and photographs, as well as the entire BLM planning process, can be followed on-line. Relevant web sites include:

Biodiversity Conservation Alliance: www.voiceforthewild.org

Bureau of Land Management: www.blm.gov
Rawlins Field Office: www.wy.blm.gov/rfo
Rock Springs Field Office: www.wy.blm.gov/rsfo

Casper Star Tribune: www.trib.com

Wyoming Tribune Eagle: www.wyomingnews.com

Wyoming Outdoor Council: www.wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org