

For people who care about the American West

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**Bulletin Board**

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**In the new West, we're all tourists**by **Ed Marston**

In Wyoming, they say, "We don't want to become like Jackson." In Colorado, "We don't want to become like Aspen." In Utah, more fervently, "We don't want to become another Moab." Yet these same people never say, "I don't want to be a Julia Roberts or Brad Pitt."

Hal K. Rothman, who is a history professor in Las Vegas, Nev., has written a book explaining why residents of small towns in the West don't fear personal celebrity but do worry about their town someday becoming a popular destination.

Rothman says we live in a post-industrial age, in which the elites and middle class take the physical trappings of wealth for granted. We no longer gain status by parking a new car in front of our house. It is travel and tourism - including such feats as climbing Mount Everest or floating around the world in a balloon (how long will it be before tour companies offer such trips for \$50,000?) - that now provide the distinction from the masses that Rothman assumes we all crave.

The impact of our need for fulfillment (not for "experiences," Rothman says, but for personal fulfillment) is visible everywhere in the American West, and Rothman explores what we have done to the people and places that serve Santa Fe, the national parks, Sun Valley, Steamboat Springs, Aspen and others.

Wherever he looks in small-town touristville, he finds a devil's bargain. Here, in its early, golden, unsustainable stage, is Jackson, Wyo.:

"(Writer Donald) Hough's portrait of the 1950s Jackson showed a community of contented if slightly alcoholic locals who rented their town out during the summers and reclaimed it after Labor Day. Everyone knew everyone by name, and they congregated to pass the time as did small-town people across the nation. If they were a little sodden, their winter accounted for it, and perhaps even the service nature of their occupations contributed to their need. Yet locals were in control, were in the distinct majority, at least throughout the winter, and the community ran in a manner they found acceptable. In Hough's portrait, locals endured the summer and the profits it brought to rediscover the essence of their town and themselves during the long, cold and thoroughly unattractive winter."

In Rothman's view of tourist places, the early days are always the best, both for the visitors and the locals. But even in the early stage, the "locals" are not the natives. Before even a

fledgling tourist economy can begin, the early natives must be shouldered aside by the "neonatives" - Rothman's most interesting conceptual creation.

Neonatives are relative newcomers to small towns who appear, to the naive eye of a visitor, to be more native than the natives. Neonatives are people who measure their longevity in a town in years rather than generations.

They fill the need for workers and small-business owners who can wait tables and guide dudes on horseback and run rivers with just the right touch. People born in a place don't "appreciate" it, don't see it the way someone who has just arrived sees it. The neonatives, beneath their new rural exterior, have urban skills and perceptions. They are able to offer visitors the image they have come in search of. With the help of these neonative service workers, the logged-over or over-grazed or mined-out landscape that can no longer support a rural economy vanishes. Instead, the neonatives help visitors to see "pristine" landscapes and rural ways that go back to a West when buffalo roamed the land. Yet another busted Western town with land-rich and cash-poor people hanging on in hopes of another commodity boom is replaced by a quaint town filled with contented people who are especially pleased to host visitors.

If the visitors don't have much money, that West is a roadside "fort" with Indians and cowboys and a gift shop selling ashtrays and rubber tomahawks and geodes. Or maybe one of those places, located in a big barn, that fills your tin plate with baked potatoes and overcooked green beans and beef, sits you down at a picnic table, and then provides two hours of Western entertainment. If you have money, you get to see a more expensive, if not a more authentic, West: a guest ranch or resort offering flyfishing, with accommodations that resemble a bunkhouse.

At first, a tourist town is low capital, unorganized and catch-as-catch can. The neonatives are friendly, but casually so. We're on their turf, and we respect and may even envy them. We're glad to be there, and willing to put up with something less than luxe, let alone deluxe. Not a great deal is at stake because the neonatives don't have much invested. They've bought out the natives, or at least the earlier residents, for dimes on the dollar. And we're not paying a lot for our rooms and food and trail rides. These starter tourist towns are for long, casual vacations rather than short, intense ones.

But at least in the places Rothman writes about, this state of affairs cannot continue. Driven by the needs or desires of local businesses to make more money, tourism evolves. The evolution is easy because Western places lack the ability to protect themselves. In fact, the inhabitants of these places, at almost any stage, glory in their inability to protect themselves. So the logging, mining and ranching communities can't keep out the neonatives and their improvised, low-rent tourism. And the neonatives can't keep out the next stage.

The faster ski lifts, better restaurants, quainter and yet more luxurious inns require more capital than local banks and entrepreneurs can provide, and so corporate dollars and corporate control move in, or are invited in, to build high-speed quad chair lifts, golf courses, five-star resorts. Land prices spiral as newcomers put up lavish homes. (Presumably, those who do so don't know that in the post-modern age, big homes no longer command universal respect.)

Rothman takes us through this evolution in town after town. In Aspen, the Aspen Skiing

Company, under President D.R.C. Brown, changed the town from one with neo-founder Walter Paepcke's cultural focus, run more or less by neonatives for neonatives, to one with a bottom-line focus. It wasn't just that the arts and seminars were no longer center stage. It was that the social fabric of the town was transformed in order to make more money. Brown's most controversial move, Rothman writes, was to raise lift-ticket prices to drive locals and their daredevil antics off the slopes, not just to make room for the visitors, but also to make them feel more comfortable on the slopes. The "town that skied" became the town that served skiers. It was the kind of transformation all successful tourist towns go through.

For his company-building efforts, Brown was hanged in effigy in the 1960s by mothers and their children protesting the lift-ticket price increases to students. Brown replied that not everyone could afford to drive a Cadillac and not everyone could afford to ski at Aspen.

A similar thing happened at the Grand Canyon in the early part of the century. Rothman writes, "... the Grand Canyon became too intellectually, culturally and financially important to be left to the locals ..." As a result, control was wrested from the locals by the National Park Service, the Fred Harvey Company, and the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.

Rothman does not argue that all tourist places have gone through exactly the same evolution. Perhaps because he lives in Las Vegas, he believes that it is at the top of the tourist-town hierarchy, and that its core product has never been successfully exported.

In Aspen and Santa Fe, their earlier histories got in the way of the new tourist economies, as when Hunter S. Thompson ran for Pitkin County sheriff in opposition to the tourist economy. Or when Debbie Jaramillo was elected mayor of Santa Fe in 1994, in part on an anti-tourism platform (HCN, 8/8/94).

According to Rothman, Las Vegas is immune to such turmoil. Las Vegas knows what it is: Whatever visitors want.

Perhaps because Las Vegas is so focused, workers there can make a living. It is "the last place in the United States where relatively unskilled workers could find a job out of high school, earn a middle-class wage, and expect to remain with the company for their entire working life."

By comparison, Aspen and Jackson Hole and most of the rest are served by transplanted Mexican villages. Brown's tactics, and those of other ski-industry leaders, worked. They made room on the slopes for the tourists, and today the Anglo ski bums are mostly gone, and many ski towns are struggling with the life-or-death challenge of fulfilling the expectations of tourists with fewer and fewer neonatives. The West's tourist towns are no longer small towns where locals work intensely for a few months, and then take back their towns during the long shoulder seasons. These towns are now factory floors, and the assembly lines run around the clock, and almost year round.

Rothman has done prodigious research, but the book's strength is his willingness to say in print things that will offend most of his readers. None of us New Westerners or visitors to the New West want to be told that hikers, climbers and river runners are no better than those

who gamble in Las Vegas or fly over the Grand Canyon in helicopters.

Lest we miss his point, Rothman ends the book by confronting that most famous critic of industrial tourism - the late Edward Abbey. Referring to Abbey's love of pulling up road-marking stakes in Arches National Park, Rothman writes: "Like (California naturalist) Mary Austin and so many others, Abbey drew an arbitrary line; on one side stood virtue, not incidentally that included himself, on the other corruption in the shape of the Bureau of Public Roads officials and their stakes." Abbey accurately confronted the harsh, destructive truth of industrial tourism, but then exempted himself and his followers from that truth, giving them a free, righteous ride.

Abbey and his followers were exempted because they focused on the environmental damage industrial tourism does. Rothman spreads his net to include tourism's social damage, and none escape.

## **Ed Marston is publisher of High Country News.**

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