

# Where is the American West? Creating a Base Map for a New Regional History

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**Historians of the American West are currently debating a very fundamental question—Where is the American West? Does it begin at the Mississippi River? the Hundredth Meridian? the Rocky Mountains? Is California and the rest of the Pacific Slope part of the West? For a subdiscipline of American history with roots reaching back more than one hundred years, this seems to be a little late to be discussing such a basic issue. However, a growing number of scholars are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which historians have traditionally defined the West—that is, equating the West with the Frontier. In response, these “New Western Historians” seek to define the West that they study in regional terms; they desire to tell the regional history of the modern American West and not the history of America’s westward expansion. They have one problem, however—where is this West region?<sup>1</sup>**

As represented in the work of Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and others, redefining the West as a region is a central part of the “New Western History.”<sup>2</sup> The frontier focus of the old western history, they argue, has led to scholarship that: (1) **celebrates the American West as a region, (2) celebrates the nineteenth century West, and (3) celebrates American “conquest” rather than critically examining the modern legacy of what was a contentious and often tragic past. Thus, the New Western Historians want to redefine their field around a regional definition of the West,** in order to create what Donald Worster has called a “clear-eyed, demythologized, and critical” account of America’s western past.<sup>3</sup>

The New Western Historians argue that viewing the West as a region, unlike viewing it as the Frontier, privileges no particular perspective and opens western history to all possible interpretations and viewpoints. **For example, a regional definition of the West would incorporate the frontier, allowing scholars avoid what Limerick calls the “premature departure” from American history textbooks of the West after 1890—when the frontier supposedly closed.**<sup>4</sup> In addition to making

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room for the twentieth-century West, the New Western Historians argue that a regional perspective affords properly expanded roles for women and non-European peoples, as well as for the environment. **More than anything else, though, the New Western Historians support a regional definition of the West simply because they are driven by, in the words of Yale historian Howard Lamar, a “ferocious regional pride.”** Most of these young scholars grew up in the Far West, and as Limerick argues, the New Western History is nothing if not a “movement to allow westerners to take their hometowns seriously.”<sup>5</sup>

Making the historiographic transition from Frontier West to Regional West has not been without its problems. **Undoubtedly the biggest barrier to such a transition is arriving at an appropriate definition of the present-day West—a task made difficult, if not impossible, by the immense diversity of places and landscapes in the western half of the United States.** The enormous environmental and human-historical differences between such unambiguously western places as the high-altitude parks of Colorado; the ranches of Nebraska’s Sandhills; the rich, wheat land of north-central Montana’s “Golden Triangle”; and the arid lands of Nevada is testimony enough. In short, to conceive of the West as a single, integrated, homogenous region, is to force a “square peg” historical geographic reality into a “round hole” regional label.

**Regionalist historians are well aware of this dilemma. Many simply have given up trying to define the West and instead rely on their gut instincts that a present-day, regional West indeed exists.** Perhaps this is actually the best course to follow—regions, after all, are nothing more than mental constructs, generalizations we use to give order to our spatially complicated world.<sup>6</sup> Well aware of this fact, American geographers have long avoided discussing the entire West as single region, even though they have found much of interest in a number of western sub-regions.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion of an “American West” remains strong, and the West will likely always retain a prominent place in most Americans’ conceptions of their continent’s physical and human geography. Perhaps best exemplified by the writings of Wallace Stegner, who recently passed away, **many people believe that it is quite reasonable to speak of something loosely labeled as a western identity—that, in fact, there exist qualities, beliefs, experiences, situations that together transcend sub-regional heterogeneity and bind together people and places that are “western.” It is precisely this broad regional identity that the old western history has been unable to capture, subsuming the West with the Midwest under the myth-laden, nineteenth-century geopolitical container we call “The Frontier.”**

Since they have been unable to definitively map the spatial extent of the present-day West, regionalist historians have begun to alternatively define their West in terms of distinctive “western” characteristics, pushing aside for the time being the region’s spatial identity. For example, Donald Worster views the West as the areas within

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North America that are dominated by livestock-raising and/or irrigated agriculture, in essence a cultural ecological definition built around the most commonly used definition of the West—aridity. Richard White, on the other hand, sees the West primarily as a historical political-economic colony of the East—a “plundered province” specializing in the export of primary products and long subjected to the hegemonic power of eastern corporations and the federal government. Meanwhile, still others view the West as an area of enormous ethnic diversity, a “cultural crossroads” at which multiple “waves” of Anglo, Hispanic, and Asian peoples met and interacted to form, together with indigenous cultures, an ethno-cultural collage of a kind found nowhere else in North America.<sup>8</sup>

I argue that defining the West in terms of distinctive western characteristics is indeed the proper way to proceed; this way, one avoids the ultimately pointless bickering over what places and areas should be identified as being in “The West”. However, at some point these “western” characteristics do need to be mapped out; they need to be cross-checked against geographic reality to see how truly western they really are.

I believe we can draw two broad lessons from this exercise. First, the New Western Historians seem to be sound in their instincts—the notion of a regional West appears to have some grounding in reality. **Thus, it seems appropriate to conceive of American history having taken two rather distinct trajectories, one generally “Western” and the other generally “Eastern”.** Historical geographies tracing certain themes—like national political economic dynamics or people-environment relations—could be well informed by a distinction between East and West. In short, the notion of a regional Western history deserves a prominent place alongside a frontier-based history of westward expansion.

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The second lesson we should derive from this exercise, however, is probably the more important one. **In attempting to speak of a regional American West, we must avoid the trap of exceptionalism.** In the present-day United States alone, we have seen that there are numerous places outside of “The West” that demonstrate one or more “western” characteristics. Such “outlier Wests” become even more common when we broaden our view and consider places from previous times and from other continents. I am not arguing that we should begin to consider south Florida, Appalachia, or Michigan’s Upper Peninsula as being part of the West. Nor am I saying that the “legacy of conquest” in these eastern places has been identical to the

the DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (<http://www.cadkas.com>). **encourage historians and geographers who are interested in the West to not place their region in a vacuum.**

## Figure A

### Patricia Nelson Limerick's Seven "Common Characteristics" of Places in the Present-Day American West

1. Prone to Aridity »» Makes these Places Resistant to "Conquest"
2. Greater Presence of American Indians and Indian Reservations
3. Greater Proportion of Land Under Federal Government Control
4. Share a Border With Mexico »» A Cultural-Economic Borderland
5. Closer than Eastern Places to the Pacific Rim »» Greater Ties to Asia
6. Primary Waves of Anglo-American Conquest Came After the U. S. A. was "Fully Formed", politically and economically
7. As a Result of All of the Above, "Prone to Demonstrate the Unsettled Aspects of Conquest"

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Source: Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Trail to Santa Fe: The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual," in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), p. 70.

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## Figure B

### Vale and Vale's Eight Popular "Mental Images" of the Present-Day American West

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1. Empty Quarter : a Land to be Plundered and Exploited by Outsiders
2. Frontier : Mythic Home to the Exotic, the Wild, and the Rugged Individual

- 3. Big Rock Candy Mountain : Land of Unbounded Opportunity for the Everyman; Bonanza/Eureka/Strike-it-Rich Country**
- 4. Middle Landscape : A Harmonious World of Human Beings Living Within their Natural Environment; A Pleasant , Healthy Mix of Wilderness and Civilization; The Garden**
- 5. Turnerian Progression : Place for the Steady Evolution of Human Society Towards Urban Civilization**
- 6. Desert : Fragile, Vacant, Arid Land**
- 7. Protected Wild Nature : National Parks and Other Monuments of Spectacular Examples of Natural History**
- 8. Playground : Venue for Outdoor Recreation**

**Source: Thomas R. Vale and Geraldine R. Vale, Western Images, Western Landscapes: Travels Along U.S. 89 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), pp. 7-10.**