

Belonging



Big Meadows, Rocky Mountain National Park

At least once a year, every year, I head out of Boulder with my mom to shoulder my backpack and set out on the approximately 3.6 mile round trip hike to Big Meadows. To those who have made the trek, it is nothing too remarkable, your typical hike to a below tree-line, alpine valley in the Rocky Mountains. Smothered with various sage bushes and daisies during the summer and a minimum of 10 inches of snow cover during the winter, it is not unlike many of the other valleys one can explore in the Rocky Mountains. However, Big Meadows will always be something more to me. Nestled between Mount Patterson and Green Mountain, the Tonahutu River leisurely runs across this meadow, making the spot a particular favorite of the surrounding moose, elk, rabbits, and other woodland animals. This short day hike, easily accomplished by the families and groups spotted on the trail, is a quick drive from the highway 34 entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, right on the edge of Grand Lake, Colorado. Highway 34, also known as the Peak to Peak Highway, attracts many tourists alike, all in search of the same indescribable gift: wilderness; or better yet, what that wilderness brings with it. Whether it's the

satisfaction of another peak conquered, another wall scaled, or another big hunt to feed the family, Rocky Mountain National Park and the entire Rocky Mountain range is an indescribable and irreplaceable natural gem. I know this because for me Big Meadows is more than a quick day hike to do while heading up to Estes Park or stopping point while hiking the Continental Divide. Big Meadows is where I feel the most grounded and soul connected to the Earth and the heritage that brought me here. It is just upriver from where my grandmother and grandfather's ashes are scattered (Grand Lake was their favorite vacation spot while my mother and uncle were growing up) and it is where my mother has told me she wants to have her ashes laid to rest. There is a silence in that meadow, a silence that somehow speaks to me. I was not born or raised in Colorado, but some yearning brought me here five years ago. In that meadow, my roots take hold, I realize I have a place in this world and I feel the strength of those before me. Every once in awhile, I'll dip my hands into the frigid water of the Tonahutu Creek and rinse off the past few months.

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Some of the inhabitants of Grand Lake's Manna Thrift Store.

"So where are you visitin' from?" the man sitting behind the dusty glass jewelry case of advertised immense antiquated value asked me as the cowbell on the thrift shop door stopped ringing.

In Grand Lake, a town with an estimated population dancing below 500, all the locals know each other. Furthermore, the town survives off of the summer months. In the beginning of what is normally a very cold, very snowy winter, most businesses in Grand Lake are closed, the docks of the marina are shut down, and the vacancy signs are illuminated at all of the hotels. So it is pretty obvious to the few locals that do stick around during the winter months whether you are from Grand Lake, or whether you are not.

“Boulder. I’m from Boulder, and my mom lives in Denver,” I replied while leafing through the neatly labeled ‘vintage Varsity jackets!’ (which, by the way, were mostly from local high schools).

And thus, ensued the painfully awkward conversation I have come to experience when I stick my pretty little liberal head into the door of a mountain town establishment and mention the word ‘Boulder.’ It often brings about, naturally, this sense of ‘us vs. them’ as the conversation continues. I politely nod my head while I listen to a fairly intimate story about how long this man’s family has been up in Grand Lake and about the one time he visited Boulder back in the 1970s. After the rehearsed conversation about why I am in Boulder, what I am doing in school and what I plan to do with my degree (where most people find the opportunity to impart me with some secret wisdom about life that they have learned that, realistically, will never apply to me) the conversation changed.

“So, what are you doing up around Grand Lake this time of year? Hardly anyone in town and most of the restaurants are closed, plus there isn’t even enough snow to go on snowmobilin’ yet,” he asked me, clearly enjoying this bit of conversation to break up his normally empty days. Feeling like I had to impress him with an equally long story, I decided to explain everything: how this was my mother and my tradition, to come up to Grand Lake during Thanksgiving (and whenever else we can) to connect back with the land, pay respects to her parents, my grandparents, and get away from the constant stress of our day to day lives, because, as I showed him, my phone did not even have service. After I had explained, almost justified, my presence there to this man I had never met before, the conversation

lightened. He wished me a good stay and a Happy Thanksgiving and I left through the chipped, white painted wooden door, hearing the same cow bell rattle as it shut behind me.

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A recreational marijuana dispensary on the drive to Grand Lake, another symbol of the changing face of Colorado's mountain towns

Where does it begin? This idea of home and someone's authenticity or right to belong somewhere; the idea that we are tied to the land where our fathers and grandfathers were born and died. It's the authenticity that reminds us of John Steinbeck's 'America,' a simpler, more rugged time where we had a living connection with the land, and that same idea of authenticity that encouraged the last 30 years of rural migration. When I set out to examine the changing face of Colorado's mountain towns during a holiday sojourn in Grand Lake, Colorado, I knew I had some personal interest vested in the topic, but I did not realize into what exactly I was delving. I came across an extremely relevant article by a man named J. Dwight Hines, who himself is the son of sheep ranchers in Wyoming's portion of the

Rocky Mountain range. He researches the concept of rural gentrification in America and the political and economic consequences of this migration, all through the not-so-disguised views of someone that grew up on the range.¹ His article, titled *The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West*, highlights and evaluates the cultural phenomena that Hines describes as ‘rural gentrification’ and how this migration is fueled by Americans continued desire to obtain the two things the frontier has historically represented: progress and mainly, authenticity. In short, Hines states that the “theme of authenticity is commonly used to explain contemporary rural gentrification — the colonization of rural/small town communities throughout the U.S. by middle class newcomers,” and that authenticity is the “unifying factor” that “motivated tens of thousands of exurbanites...to migrate.”² Maybe it was my sudden surprise at being so aptly segregated as a newcomer, or the continuing use of divisive language in the article, but throughout Hines’ study on rural gentrification I started to feel more and more like I did not belong, or that I did not have a right to enjoy the breathtaking landscapes under which others were fortunate enough to be born.

I put my sensitive feelings aside, and suspended by stance as a ‘newcomer’ to see if I could fully understand the impact of this social study and its application to the world around me, specifically the small town of Grand Lake that I have come to know and love. It seemed to me, in a polite and much more educated way, Hines’ article was a plea for us ‘rural gentrifiers’ to go home, to get out of the hardly-touched frontier before we industrialize and capitalize on all the opportunities that we can. This is an argument, however, that is all too familiar amongst the complaints of residents of the increasingly upscale ski resort towns like Vail and Breckenridge, and even in the greatly expanded and developed city

¹<http://www.pointpark.edu/Academics/Schools/SchoolofArtsandSciences/Departments/HumanitiesandHumanSciences/HumanitiesFacultyandStaff/JDwightHines>

² Hines, J. Dwight. “The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West.” *Journal of the West*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, 2007, p 63

of Boulder.³ What makes these open, empty, beautiful natural spaces so priceless is their anonymity. Often, once the secret is out, the wonder is gone, commodified, and paved over.

What makes the frontier, considered as the Rocky Mountain region in this argument, so attractive for those that seek to migrate is progress and authenticity. According to Hines, this has always been the case. We have moved West, conquered the frontier, and settled in pursuit of the fabled American Dream, discovering along the way. According to many Americans, the Rocky Mountain range is one of the few remaining 'authentic' American places because it embodies the natural splendor of our country and has not become completely shifted by the industrial landscape. In addition, the idea of the frontier as a new place to go to is a crucial part of American history and part of our nation's identity. The face of the frontier, however, has significantly changed since our wagon wheel ancestors came this way. As Hines describes: "the frontier as a concept encapsulates one of the central paradoxes in American thought...the frontier was considered the point at which progress was made tangible."⁴ Hines is right. In the 19th century, when the frontier was starting to be explored and settled under the patriotic cry of "Manifest Destiny," people moved west to find new opportunities, to make a new start, and to improve their current lives. Fast forward to the vision of the current mountain town, where locals will increase prices for tourists, muttering under their breath some comment about how we are ruining their town while realistically, the shops next door have been up for lease for over two years and an increasing number of town residents are struggling to make their mortgage payments. Once a place that welcomed the innovative, a wide open space that encouraged progress and growth, is now all too often considered 'ruined' by urban migrants who frequently bring with them a lust for capitalism and pursuit of profit.

³ To expand on this further: think of those "Natives Only" Colorado bumper stickers. I mean, really? One of the most beautiful parts about the United States of America is its federal nature. Each state can operate under more locally relevant and democratically produced laws that may be different than other states' laws, and separate but always technically subordinate to federal law. If I do not like where I live, I have a right as an American to migrate to a place that further supports my individuality and allows me to be a productive member of society. And don't even get me started about the whole idea of 'native' for that matter...

⁴ Hines, J. Dwight. "The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West." *Journal of the West*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, 2007, p 63

Hines described the same concept over and over again in his article evaluating the rural gentrification of the Rocky Mountain region: “These two apparently antithetical ideas configure the frontier as a perfect encapsulation of the seemingly paradoxical ideals of authenticity and progress, which coexist in productive tension with one another in our American-Modernity.”⁵ This productive tension was crucial in creating and expanding the early 20th century industrial American society into the frontier. The



A large lot for sale overlooking Grand Lake

development of new farming and ranching technologies, the discovery of new natural resources, and the settlement of untouched pristine environments were all elements of the ‘productive tension’ that helped propel America its economic hegemony. The frontier is therefore considered the point where civilization stops and wilderness begins. A place where one can easily go back and forth between the two, so that one does not have to exchange progress for the ‘authentic’ American experience, and vice versa. This idea is part of the quintessential What I found most surprising in Grand Lake, however, was the absence of this touted progress that locals and intellectuals describe as the ruinous end to a gentrified mountain town. All I saw this winter during my mother and my annual trip, it seemed, were ‘For Sale’ and ‘closed’ signs.

⁵ Hines, J. Dwight. “The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West.” *Journal of the West*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, 2007, p 67



ahan NF Competition

The front window of a real estate office in town, closed for the day, with numerous listings posted.

A dilapidated mini golf course that has been for sale for at least 3 years. Prime location and large lot.



Now let me stop and preface the reader before you think I am going to make some excuse for why we should be allowed to inundate these rural towns with our almighty dollar and save the town while also enjoying a slice of appropriately groomed natural heaven. I am very aware that many people have ties to the land and that the rural lifestyle is drastically different from the urban lifestyle that I know. I recognize and try to understand the impacts of my migration. In his article, while Hines addresses the paradoxical nature of the frontier as the ideal of authenticity and progress, he also warns of the issues that these gentrifying migratory patterns may have for less wealthy, rural regions. I realized, while comparing my most recent visit to Grand Lake to the dozen or so weeks spent vacationing there the past five years, that this effect had more or less taken place. Local businesses close for the winter season, relying heavily on tourist traffic from (predominantly) suburban and urban vacationers. Some stay for the whole summer, or just a few days. They all contribute heavily to the local economy, seeing as the nearest King Soopers (called 'City Market' out there) is a thirty minute drive away in Granby. However, once the marinas lift the boats around the end of September and families migrate back to Boulder, Denver, Fort Collins, or wherever, business slows to a halt just in time for temperatures to drop



and the lake to start to freeze over.⁶ The hotels have continued vacancy for the majority of the winter, some urban families rent out their homes privately, often being able to afford not filling the rooms, and half of the businesses close until May. The few that remain open greatly reduce their hours. The town depends on the summer tourist industry to continue to survive economically, but is also greatly impacted by the variability of a seasonal clientele. When I looked at the aspects of rural gentrification in the sense of Grand Lake, it became evident why the common sentiment in mountain towns is often against newcomers. Despite the fact that these individuals often contribute to the economy, often they create the same inequalities that can be present in urban society. The hardest part of for me to understand at this point is where I stand in the middle of all of this. I am not the typical millionaire that might come to mind when one thinks of historical gentrification, but I am of a decent economic class and live in a small urban environment. "Exurban middle class" migration is a huge part of the rural gentrification that Hines discusses in his article, which seemed more and more like an attack on the exurban middle class person that I happen to be.⁷ Apparently, this socioeconomic group has had the most sizeable impact on the gentrification and change of rural Rocky Mountain towns.

⁶ This year the lake was not frozen over, which is rather rare in November. It has been an unseasonably warm winter so far, which has impacted several ski resort towns in the region as well.

⁷ Hines, J. Dwight. "The Persistent Frontier & the Rural Gentrification of the Rocky Mountain West." *Journal of the West*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, 2007, p 67

And so, I find myself confused and disappointed. Is there a compromise? Is there a way for those



Do not miss a chance to stop by Pollys on Grand Avenue if you can, they have homemade cones.

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Snow is a form of recorded history. It tells the story of who or what has passed by, in what direction, how fast or slow, and how long ago. While I stood, calf deep in the mostly undisturbed snow drifts in Big Meadows, I could see the fresh, clunky foot prints of me and my mother's hiking boots. The

who were not born on the modern frontier to explore and enjoy it at our own leisure? It seems unfair to keep all that beauty away from those who would also appreciate it. There is a balance, a concept that I could tell was hastily overlooked in the analysis by Hines. It is up to each of us, on an individual level, to responsibly interact with the world and those around us so that we can share and preserve nature for longer. Even though I was born far away from Grand Lake, I have roots there, roots that connect me to the land and the people just like everyone else around the world. If we all look to the unity, the common roots of humanity, the land will not look so divided anymore.

story the snow failed to tell, however, was that we were not alone in that valley. I know that the footsteps of my grandmother and grandfather paralleled my own as traipsed along the outside of the meadow. It is in these moments where I find connection to my authentic self. As Hines describes numerous times in his study on the gentrification of the Rocky Mountain region, it is the appeal of authenticity that brings many to this wide open frontier. But is that so bad? As a common humanity, we should welcome one another to find a space where we feel vital, loved, and alive. If more and more people must flock from more urbanized places like Boulder to rural towns to do that, then so be it. If they are migrating for the right reason, they should have every intention to preserve and respect the space that is sacred and authentic to them. Nature is too powerful to not be shared, so go explore. Find your roots.



Fox tracks on a snow bank in Big Meadows, Rocky Mountain National Park.