

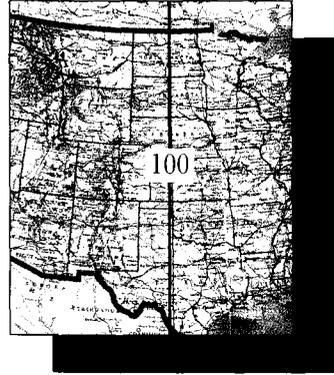
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

The Home of the Brave

Vague and acrid as the ochereous smoke drifting in scarves and shoals from fires burning across the West, the specter of Range Reform pervaded the Rocky Mountain states last summer, the driest on record since 1932. In drought years ranchers must move their cattle rapidly off one pasture and onto the next in order to prevent them from biting down the sparse short grasses. Over on the Thoman Ranch on the Green River several miles south of Fontenelle Dam, they were shorthanded during the season as the youngest daughter, Laurie, completing her reign as Miss Rodeo Wyoming, appeared in rodeos and parades around the Western states, while in town, 30 miles away, I was sunk in an armchair scribbling notes for a book. When may a gentleman refuse a lady in distress? I think of Jeeves' answer to Bertie Wooster, who had inquired on what occasion a gentleman may appear without a necktie. There *is* no occasion, Jeeves replied, when a gentleman may not wear a necktie.

Being a friend of Mary Thoman is hard work. Back in Kemmerer, my study was filling up with documents pertaining to the Cumberland/Uinta Grazing Allotment Steering Committee; down here on the Green River I had been in the saddle since 7:30 A.M., and it was getting on to six in the evening now. Mary sat the bay thoroughbred, barking orders from under the rolled brim of her purple felt hat at the cows, and at me. We had pushed the 30-odd head of cattle out of the Seedskadee Allotment (federal range), for which the Thomans' grazing permit was set to expire at midnight, and were trying to put them across the river where they balked, most of them standing in water to their chests but some breaking from the herd to gallop onto the grassy verge. We ki-yied and sshed, hazing them, setting the horses at the water to push the cows into mid-stream and breaking away to round up and drive back the renegades, but each time the leaders were lifted off bottom by the current and began swimming they changed their minds and returned to shallow water. My horse was so exhaust-



ed I could get no acceleration from him, and at last Mary said that we had better hold the cows together in the river until Mickey Thoman, who was bringing along a second bunch, arrived. "As hot as it is, I'm surprised they don't want to get wet. They're behaving really badly today. I wish Mother would hurry up and get here."

It was pleasant sitting horseback in the river where the weeds ran their full length in the freshened current caused by a recent release from the dam upstream, pale boulders parted the infinite series of advancing black wavelets with a purling sound, and the big riverine cottonwoods turned over slowly on a light wind, exposing the pale undersides of their leaves. On both sides of the river the desert lifted away in golden steps beyond the vivid green of the trees. Mary, as she kept a watchful eye on the cows, described for me their complicated social life: how they will park their calves when they need to go to water, how they provide daycare for the calves of other cows . . . "—Bring that one back!" she shouted, pointing suddenly behind me. I reined the horse about and took off at a gallop, slapping with the full length of my legs at the broad barrel.

"You know," I told her when we had brought everyone together again, "maybe the way for you ranchers to get around the environmentalist crowd is to play up the humane and sympathetic qualities of cows: their intelligence, their caring nature, their inherently progressive social system—"

"No," Mary said decidedly, "it wouldn't work. They wouldn't let us sell them for beef then. Here comes Mother along the fence with the cows. What is she doing on the other side

of it?"

She rode over to greet her across the wire while I held the cows in the water, and returned to explain that Mickey, seeing the gate above the river in the closed position, had assumed that it was also locked. An electric fence installed by the government to keep cattle out of the wildlife refuge prevented her from putting the cows around the end of the Thoman's fence and driving them upstream to our herd. So we stood once more with the cows while Mickey drove her animals back along the fence, off the bottom and onto the bench and across it half a mile to the gate, and down to the river again.

When we added Mickey's cows to our cows the expanded herd began immediately to cross, taking a course downriver from the one we had chosen for them. Here the water ran shallower than it appeared from the bank, but we were careful anyway to give wide berth to the boulders, behind which the current gouges deep holes; falling into one of these, a panicked horse will attempt to climb on the swimming rider. In the early 70's, while the Thoman family was battling the federal government's campaign to condemn their deeded land along the river for the refuge, Mary's sister Cathy was drowned crossing the Green on horseback.

As soon as the cows reached the opposite shore they dove into the cottonwoods and willows and scattered; we put the horses after them, dodging and wheeling among the tree trunks, the down timber, and the shattered stumps, the raking branches and the underbrush. The cattle ran bawling and stomping, but within ten minutes we had flushed them from the breaks and set them moving together onto the bench and across the upland sagebrush turning lavender under the flat long strokes of the setting sun. The yellow grass had headed a month or six weeks early and the bentonite ground was parched to a hardness that went to powder under the animals' hooves, forcing me to raise my bandana against the dust and pollen and miniscule fragments of sagebrush. Thirty minutes later we put the cows through the gate onto new pasture. Then we rode down the river and crossed at a low

place, Mickey's Blue Heeler rolling his eye at me as he swam doggedly beside the horse. "Do you see," Mary asked, "where the sod is falling into the river? They tell us the cows do that, but the river undercuts the grass naturally. If the BLM comes out here tomorrow and finds any of our cows left, we'll be in trouble. I'll fly in the morning and see if I can spot any stragglers."

The Cessna appeared to pivot on one wing on the desert flat as we turned west again toward the river. From 500 feet up (7000 on the altimeter) the desert looked almost entirely barren, a lichenous pattern of spaced sagebrush spread over a pale gray floor pimpled with ant hills and stained white by alkali deposits. The smoke from fires in Washington, California, Oregon, Idaho, and Utah dimmed the sky, and I made out the Big Sandy fire burning up a canyon in the Wind River Range, 80 miles east across the Green River Basin and visible this morning only as a dark transitional shadow between the earth and the sky. Meandering south from the wide cofferdam restraining Fontenelle Reservoir the Green revealed its rust-colored bed, streaked by weedy greens above which white pelicans floated. The bottom was emerald on the east side of the river, but on the west side its intensity was muted and the polls of the cottonwoods showed gray and ugly. "The trees have been dying since they filled the reservoir," Mary explained as she brought the wing up. "Cottonwood seeds can't germinate without a layer of silt above them laid down by flooding. With the dam in place, there are no more spring floods, and without the floods the water table is dropping. Add to that the salty alkali ponds the refuge is providing, and there is no way for the trees to live. We can see those trees dying back a little every year; in another 15 or 20, they'll all be dead, except on the side of the river where we irrigate. But the environmentalists don't care. They think that because the government did it, everything is perfectly all right."

We scrutinized the bottom carefully and saw no cows on the refuge, but Mary was not willing to return to Kemmerer yet. In the groves along the banks and on the islands where the river braided, buildings constructed of logs hewn from the same cottonwoods stood in various stages of disrepair. Some of these, built by the early homesteaders, had been acquired by the Thomans and finally aban-

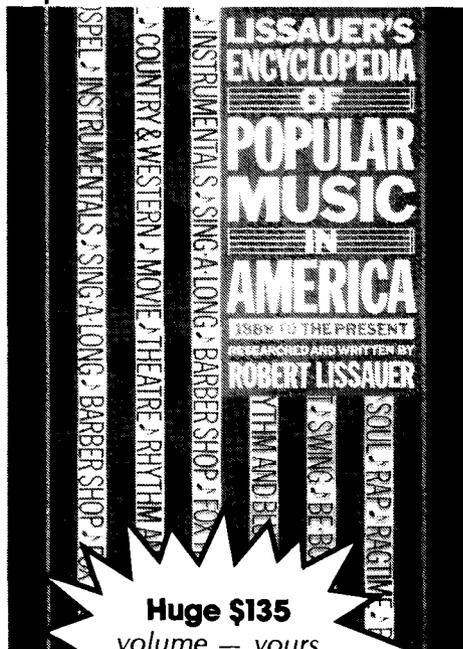
doned when, after a 20-year condemnation, the federals succeeded in forcing the family from the land on which they had established a prosperous ranch and raised six of their seven children. "All for a bird refuge, and we're not even on a major flyway," Mary said. This action followed by a decade the acquisition, also by the federal government, of the ranch's deeded land upriver, which though crucial to its operation for pasture and the production of a hay crop was desired by the United States Bureau of Reclamation to create a major water impoundment on the upper Green River. When the Bureau of Sports Fisheries approached them about taking the majority of their remaining land for the refuge, the Thomans decided it was time to make a stand against the government. They fought the condemnation for years at tremendous legal cost, but the law regarding takings was even less generous 25 years ago than it is today and their adversary had no incentive to compromise and no obligation to offer a land exchange. Instead, after accomplishing thievery by legal means, it admitted having neglected to secure an appropriation from Congress from which to make compensation: unable to offer full payment at the time of transfer, it dribbled checks in widely disparate amounts over a ten-year period to the Thoman Ranch, which could not tell from one month to the next how much money to expect and was for that reason incapable of either purchasing another ranch or rebuilding on higher ground above the river north of the refuge. At last, two weeks before Christmas while the family was burying their eldest son after he had been killed in a winter wreck on South Pass, the federals sent final payment and notified the Thomans that their patience was exhausted and that they would henceforth charge them a fine of \$500 for each day that they remained on the old ranch. By working through the winter with a backhoe, excavating the foundations and the water and sewer lines, the Thomans installed themselves in March on the new place, having incurred a penalty of \$15,000. In Mary's girlhood, there were no paved roads to Fontenelle, no electricity and no water; turning north again, she pointed out for me the white frame schoolhouse in which she and her brothers and sisters had been instructed by a teacher on the ranch and where she had taken her first steps on the road to a Ph.D.

We flew north of the ranch, and circled it. "Is that you, Mary?" Mickey called up on the radio, and Mary assured her that the cows were now where they belonged. As the July sun heated the ground and the thermals rose, putting substantial bumps in the road, we took a southwest heading on the Kemmerer Airport, known to pilots as among the most hazardous in North America. The Exxon Corporation's La Barge Creek sour gas plant passed under the left wing, and also a few of its contributing wells. I had worked on one of these wells years before, in January of 1980, when the temperature reached 40 degrees below zero and the wind blew 60 miles an hour; the drilling crew was so bundled you couldn't tell them apart from each other and the heater in the derrick froze solid. Off the right wing 20 miles out, the tilted blue ridges—Absaroka, Indian, Commisary, Dempsey—ran north in parallel lines toward the Wyoming and Salt River ranges. So much country, so little time to get to know it all.

The windsock pointed northeast. Mary overflew the airport and came around sharply north, preparing to land to the south. As the Cessna lowered toward the airstrip the runway lights flashed on, red over white, and suddenly the sock swung directly into line with our approach. I recalled another friend who had nearly caught a wingtip while attempting to land on this high mesa always subject to powerful shifting winds, but we were committed now. Mary made a nearly perfect three-point landing and taxied up to the gas pump. In spite of his many thousands of hours as a military pilot and since, the deputy sheriff to whom she leases the plane was once diverted by crosswinds seconds before touchdown onto the alternate east-west runway. "People ask me if I'm not afraid to fly a plane," Mary said. "I tell them that it's when I get on a horse that my life passes before my eyes nowadays."

She dropped me at the house and thanked me for my help with the cattle drive. "The ranchers are the best environmentalists Bruce Babbitt will ever find," she said. "The land has been such a part of our lives! Since the government took our deeded land, we've been completely dependent on the federal leases that Babbitt wants to 'reform.' When I talk about the last roundup, I'm not kidding anymore."

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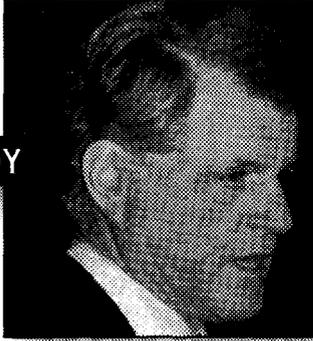
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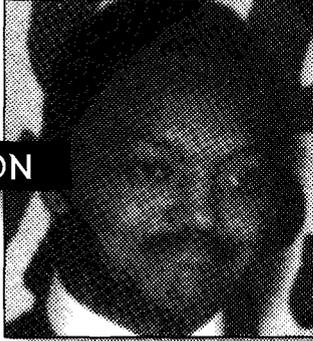
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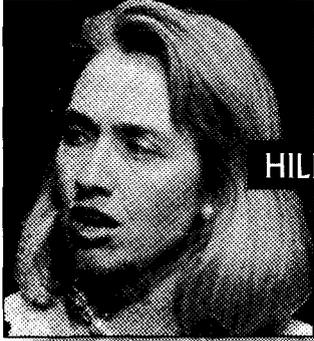
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