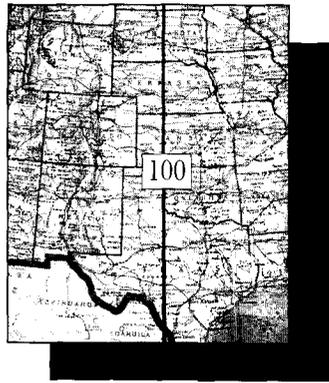

The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Zia

There is a point along New Mexico Route 6, on the edge of the West Mesa of the Rio Grande, from which as you look east the whole of the river valley between Albuquerque and Socorro—a distance of about 120 miles—appears, backed by the Sandia, the Manzanos, and the Pinos mountains. Obscured by the bosque that accompanies it on both banks, the river slides from beneath the smoky pall of the metropolis, across the Indian reservation past Ileta Pueblo, and down through the historic Spanish communities of Peralta, Los Lunas, Tomé, and Belen in the floodplain. These towns are separated by small farms and dairies, adobe houses, irrigated fields, orchards, cattle pastures, horse corrals, and old mission churches, also of adobe and roofed with tin. In winter time, the fields are sere and yellow, the bosque the color of old silver. Beyond the floodplain the desert of the East Mesa sweeps upward in green-gold waves against the brown and purple folds of the mountains, surmounted by dark pine forests and bright snow. Southward the greater valley widens, separated by a line of distant bergs from a sky of widening blue. This is the Rio Abajo, one of the oldest settled areas of European North America and the most distinct of the various cultural components—Indian, Spanish, “Anglo,” Californian, Midwestern, Eastern—that make New Mexico among the more socially complicated of the Rocky Mountain states.

Rio Abajo civilization dates from the 16th century when the Rio Grande Valley was the corridor connecting the Spanish colonies of New Spain and New Mexico, in which the Camino Real ran. It is a mixture of Spanish, Mexican, and Indian culture and blood, in which the Spanish tradition claims dominance. “Hispanics” of the Rio Abajo disdain and dislike Mexicans, having about as much enthusiasm as Americans in California feel for immigrants from south of the border. Here the regional aristocracy are Spanish surnamed—Baca, Luna, Sanchez, Trujillo, Aragón, Jaramillo, Otero, Gallejos—and many of them are blue-eyed. Yet the cuisine is not Spanish but Mexican-Indian—chili, “tortillas” (tortilla in Spanish means a sandwich, not the familiar



disc of flour dough or maize), and refried beans—and the lingua franca the Southwestern equivalent of the *franglais* of the American Northeast and of Quebec. Spanish as it is spoken in the Rio Abajo would be recognized only with difficulty in Castille or Andalusia, but it is not the patois of Mexico, either. As for Rio Abajo English, while the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary are recognizable by transplants from Chicago or California, and also visitors from Wyoming, the pronunciation, intonation, and inflexion are strange, and wholly original. I was made consciously aware of the fact the winter before last when Jim Rauhen drew my attention to it while we shopped at the Albertson’s supermarket in Los Lunas. “Did you hear that?” Jim asked. “That’s standard English in New Mexico.” “What is?” “Checker on line *w-a-a-a-an*, please!” a female employee yelled again over the intercom. After that incident I paid close attention to the local speech habits, picking up such examples as “Oh, he is a school *t-e-e-acher!*”, and, “I’m glad you *l-i-i-ike* it, man!” In leaving the Rio Abajo, you also leave the peculiarities of speech behind. In Reserve, New Mexico, or in Gallup or Farmington, “Hispanics” may speak English with a Spanish accent or with no accent at all, but they will not direct you to take your groceries to line *w-a-a-a-an*. There is material here for a doctoral dissertation on the American language, but I have never known anyone besides Jim Rauhen who recognized the possibilities.

Enthusiasts for multiculturalism and cultural diversity might expect to discover the New Jerusalem in Belen (Spanish for Bethlehem), Los Lunas, et al. If so, they would find disillusionment instead. While “racism” is as frequently dis-

cerned and adverted to in the Rio Abajo as in any other portion of modern-day America, intolerance and prejudice are far more likely to be expressed by the “Hispanic” majority than by the “Anglo” minority. Condescending as these self-claimed descendants of the Spanish conquistadores may be toward Mexicans and Indians, they are still less appreciative of Anglo-Americans—and of blacks, of whom there are few, even in Albuquerque. In spite of a large influx of Anglos, many of them retired, from the Northeast, the Midwest, and from California, two decades and more have been insufficient to dissolve the cultural barriers between the old New Mexicans and the new. Hispanics tend not to acknowledge or even to make eye contact with Anglos in public places except when absolutely necessary, or to acknowledge a lifted forefinger on the steering wheel—the recognized high-sign of neighborliness throughout the great open spaces of the Intermountain West. Theologically speaking, the Catholic parish churches of the Rio Abajo are united in one Body; socially, they are divided by race and culture, the two groups having little to do with one another and maintaining a perceptible level of mutual suspicion, if not of outright hostility. A year and a half ago, a blue-eyed scion of the pure Spanish culture, alarmed by what he regarded as a takeover by “Anglos” of the Belen School District, announced his candidacy for an open position on the school board in a race against a well-do-to “Anglo” banker. He won. The truth is, with the influx of Californian and Midwesterners to New Mexico—most of them settling in Santa Fe and in Albuquerque, 65 miles south of the state capital—in the last ten years, the custom and culture of the Rio Abajo are indeed endangered; they may well be overrun and obliterated in the next 20 years, unless haruspices predicting an end to the alien migrations and the resulting economic boom are accurate. The town of Belen is run by a handful of powerful citizens: the Spanish Mafia. In the next ten—even five—years, their control is likely to be broken, their influence swept away by tides of newcomers preceded by cadres of real estate developers, builders, and monied interests with influence of their own.

The new people are mostly retirees or

employed by Intel, a manufacturer of microchips based in California which has recently built the world's largest manufacturing plant on the edge of the West Mesa across the river from Albuquerque. Arriving from everywhere, the retired build retirement communities for themselves and settle into them behind the adobe walls, palm trees, cedars, and cypresses protecting their country clubs, golf courses, and tennis courts. They keep to themselves, seeing no one from beyond their artificial enclaves and hardly venturing into the surrounding country except to drive on the interstate to visit doctors and dentists, shop, and catch planes in Albuquerque. I have met people, by no means all of them elderly, who have never explored the surrounding mountains; who don't hunt, ride horseback, camp and climb, or even picnic in this spectacular and—relatively speaking—hospitable country. Except for the sun (represented by the stylized Zia symbol on the state's yellow-and-red license plate), the absence of real cold, and the desert expanse, they might as well be living in Oak Park, Illinois, or somewhere on Long Island. In the community of Tierra Grande south of Belen, where Jim Rauen built his house and where the majority of the residents are *not* retired, I have gone months in the past two winters without once seeing a living soul working in his yard, walking on the road, or riding one of the several horses that are boarded here.

The economy of New Mexico, which has a population smaller than that of the borough of Brooklyn, New York, is Intel. The plant takes millions of cubic feet of water daily from the Rio Grande and from the immense aquifer underlying the city of Albuquerque to wash its microchips. Since the 1970's, urban growth has depleted the aquifer substantially, and now Intel is proposing to buy water

rights 120 miles to the south in the vicinity of Socorro. Rio Rancho, formerly a suburb of Albuquerque and today an incorporated city—in 1995, the fastest-growing in the United States—owes its explosive growth entirely to Intel. Environmentalist groups predictably have gone on the warpath against the company, attempting to mitigate its abuse of the water table. Yet Intel is helping to make New Mexico in one sense the environmentalist movement's dream: its developmental model for the future of the Southwest, and the Intermountain West as a whole. Before Intel, New Mexico had been financially dependent on the federal government: Kirkland Air Force Base, Roswell, White Sands, and Alamogordo. But the United States is not building or testing bombs anymore, and Kirkland Base in Albuquerque barely survived the round of base closings last year. It is unlikely to survive many more rounds. The New Mexican population is predominantly urban, and the rural population under unremitting attack from environmental activists in the cities, who wish to bring ranching, mining, and timber-cutting to an end throughout the hinterland. Increasingly, New Mexico is polarized between high-tech professionals in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and agricultural and extractive interests around the state. Environmentalists do not want to live in and work with nature, they want to manage it from a distance, venturing outward from the confines of their high-tech and supposedly nonenvironmentally exploitive urban enclaves to play in it without touching, and admire. The achievement of this ideal seems already well underway.

A recent book by Wallace Kaufman (*No Turning Back: Dismantling the Fantasies of Environmental Thinking*, Basic Books, 1994) suggests the potential environmental destructiveness of that ideal. This is ironic, since Kaufman intends to show that what he sees as the repudiation by environmentalism of modern science and technology would, if accepted by society at large, abort the micro- and macromanagement of nature that is necessary to redress the damage done by industrialism to global ecological systems. But Kaufman overemphasizes environmentalists' Luddite propensities by accepting their condemnation of science and technology at face value. Environmentalism is a postmodern phenomenon, like deconstructionism, virtual reality, and collarless shirts. Typically,

environmentalists are part of the so-called knowledge revolution, operators of sophisticated electronic systems that power the communications and propaganda industries, as well as industrial science. They belong to the techno-industrial complex that produced Intel, and that Kaufman believes essential to reversing the environmental degradation produced by the old industrialism.

Environmentalists often talk as if they believed that taking rural lands out of productive use and turning them over to recreationists and the recreational industry, while persuading rural populations to withdraw to the cities for their livelihood, were the best and perhaps the only means of preserving the integrity of nature, particularly "wilderness." But as anyone who has recently visited Jackson (Wyoming), Aspen (Colorado), or Prescott (Arizona) knows, in actuality there is no reason from an environmentalist standpoint to prefer the present-day resort town of Park City, Utah, to the mining town that was Park City 100 years ago, but rather the opposite. Today in Park City, people ostensibly do nothing more environmentally destructive than chopping divots from golf courses or, at the worst, adding a new ski run. But the population of the modern town is probably ten times that of the old one; ranch and farm land has been destroyed to make way for it, air quality has been ruined, the terrain disrupted and rearranged by bulldozers—an entire landscape transformed by the hand of man. The problem with the leave-nothing-but-footprints, take-nothing-but-pictures approach to nature is that culture in the true sense of the word is created by work, not by play or "recreation," and that a sustainable relationship between man and nature depends upon the existence of an integral culture. If the rise of techno-industrialism were really the cultural triumph that Wallace Kaufman, George Gilder, and other of its apologists say it is, then why are the centers of techno-industrialism—our blighted cities—the cultural wastelands and nightmares of the human spirit that almost everyone recognizes them to be? The notion that the beauty and integrity of the natural world can or will be protected by people whose daily aesthetic experience is of urban chaos and inhumanity, commercial architecture, consumer culture, and technocratic values is absurd, as the lawyers say, on the face of it. But as New Mexico goes, so goes the West. ©

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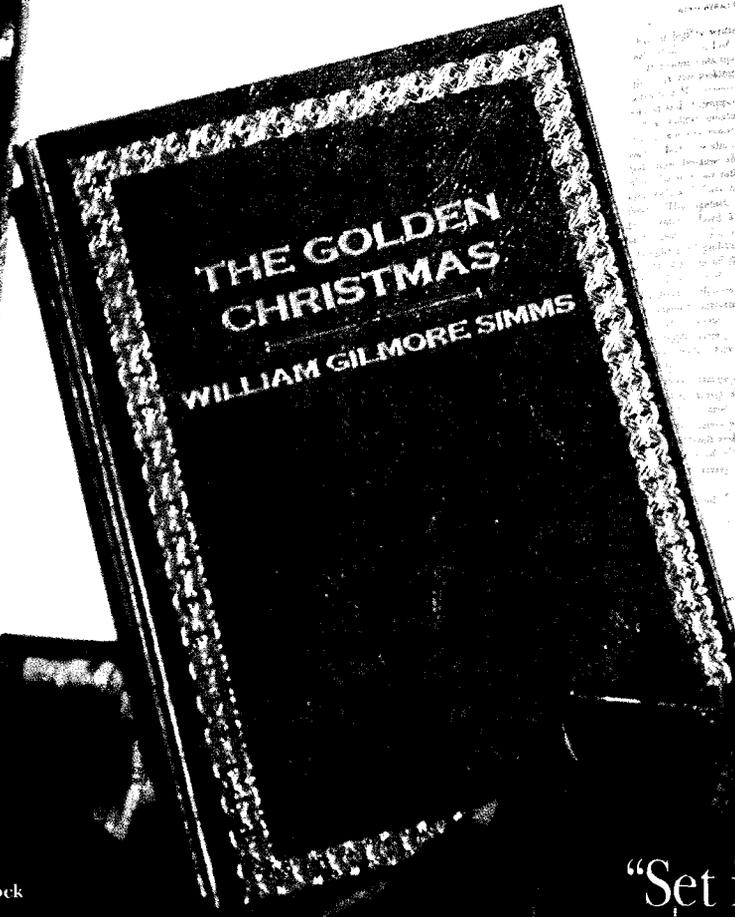
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