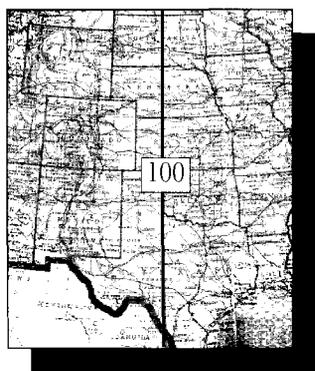

The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Backtracking for Home

I was gone from Wyoming less than two years, not so long as to forget, just enough for the shock of recognition to be poignant. The cold northern skies, the tilted mesas tinged green with sagebrush and purple with lupin, and how they smell after rain; the dark, distant mountains whose mottling snows above timberline merge with the piling summer clouds; the lucid green aspen forests hemmed by black timber; the high mountain meadows, designated “parks” by the British-born Mountain Men struck by their seemingly human regularity; the willowy meanders in the floodplains, the buck-and-pole fences, all the pretty flowers. . . . It’s good to be home in Wyoming again. Racial memory is a politically incorrect theory which stands a good chance of having reality behind it nonetheless. Seeing Wyoming for the first time at the age of 30, I had a feeling of total and immediate acceptance amounting to identity. Nineteen years later, watching *Braveheart* with Billie Jean Redemeyer and Wally Roney on their cattle ranch in the northern Sacramento Valley, I finally understood why when an early scene of a talus peak in Scotland rising above a mountain lake with a stand of dwarf pine in the foreground created a momentary illusion of the High Uinta Mountains along the Utah-Wyoming border. I have never visited the north of Scotland where my ancestors in untold generations froze and thrived amid gorse, naked rock, and mist—things my Celtic blood remembered, though in 1977 they were still “new” to me.

I’m in southeastern Wyoming now, not southwestern; Laramie rather than Kemmerer, 290 road miles away: a university town instead of a coal one, oriented to Denver rather than Salt Lake City, capital of Greater Mormonlandia. Going C.P. Snow one better, Laramie has three cultures, not two: the University of Wyoming, the ranching community, and the townies—the people who sell you Budweiser and boots and the students computers and condoms; who fix your roof when it leaks and collect the local property taxes. In the bars downtown, good foreign beer is on tap, and there are



plenty of interesting people to talk to. In the Buckhorn, where locals and rural outlanders gather (along with plenty of the college kids) after work and getting into a fistfight is as easy as running up your credit card at the mall, the conversation has to do with sports, big-game hunting, and women; across the street and around the corner at Café Jacques, the barman is ready to take on anyone disputing his views of Cormac McCarthy’s novels, and a geologist with UW describes the ruins of a Spanish hacienda he discovered last summer in the desert north of Magdalena, New Mexico. After nine o’clock at night during Jubilee Days, squad cars pause beside the open doors of the bars while the drivers search out the faces of familiar drunks, and departing patrons are liable to a tail or else a police escort until they’ve had a chance to demonstrate their legal sobriety behind the wheel. In a town where (the Matthew Shepard case to the contrary) crime is nearly nonexistent and the undergraduates are trying to outdrink the cowboys who are trying to put the university faculty under the table, DWI apparently is the Laramie PD’s chief concern.

I imagine Laramie, Wyoming, a town built in the middle of a mature cottonwood forest (tough on the allergy-prone, the cottonwood is nevertheless about the only tree that will grow here) to be a Western version of Oxford, Mississippi, in Faulkner’s day: a university town that is also a rural seat and regional hub. With less than 27,000 residents (by the 1990 census), it doesn’t look to have changed much in the last 50 years; certainly not in the 20 I have known it. The downtown business district, earmarked for historical preservation years ago, is dominated by the slim sandstone spire of

St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church lifting above the two-storey red-brick façades and flat roofs, everything within a block or two of the railyards where the Union Pacific trains rumble between Cheyenne and Rawlins, regular and confident as if commercial flight and the trucking industry were totally unheard of. The old residential district where I live, three blocks from the university, looks as much Midwestern as Western: handsome clapboard bungalows and stucco ones, brick houses, and tall, gabled buildings shaded by the massy cottonwoods and grown up around with old lilac bushes and pleasant flower gardens (the one belonging to my neighbor across the way is exemplary). The streets are named for presidents of the United States during the First American Empire, and also Civil War generals (fighting on the Union side, of course, which didn’t have many good ones) who came West, after they freed the slaves, to butcher the Plains Indians. Their names are carefully inscribed in the curbstones at the intersections where the streets that honor them meet. An Old American town, Laramie: a relic of the America some of us still remember, from the times before America ceased to be.

Stepping out to the middle of Kearney Street in front of Number 1301, I look west 15 blocks between the double row of shade trees to the territorial railroad depot and beyond it, across the Laramie Plains, to the Snowy Range pushing up across the border from west of Estes Park, Colorado. Twelve thousand feet high and plainly visible at a distance of 40 miles, Medicine Bow Peak stands forward, a thin wall of granite holding back the western sky. In July, the rock is threaded with platinum veins of snow; elsewhere the country is a cool green, watery looking beneath the depths of blue sky where exfoliating thunderheads like pink and gold roses are blooming by early afternoon. Naturally, I had to go there—by pickup truck first, scouting for access later by horseback.

The weather was cloudy over the Laramie Plain when I started, with a powerful storm cell rupturing itself on the granite peaks. An intermittent rain began falling as I started into the foothills, changing to hail below Lake Marie and the pass at 10,847 feet. But the sky

cleared as I came off the east slope into a different weather system and the old, familiar, westerly Wyoming of dry skies, broken sagebrush plains, and tors and outcrops of pulverizing, antelope-colored sandstone and shale.

Saratoga, with a population of only 1,969 people, has some pretty highflying ones among them. Two Lear jets and another, much larger, private one stood parked at the end of the airstrip where Ross Perot and other undesirable elements fly in occasionally for a game of golf at the country club—itsself a throwback to the old Cheyenne Club of more than a hundred years ago, where gentlemen ranchers in the pay of the big British cattle companies (which operated without bothering to *own* Wyoming, including, often, the ground they built their houses and barns on) dined on champagne, caviar, and oysters, as well as elk and, of course, beef. They tried scaring the small settlers out and, when they wouldn't scare, shot or hanged them. The anti-settler campaign culminated in what is known as the Johnson County War (not to be confused with the Lincoln County War in Mexico featuring Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett) in the 1890's, when a small private army fielded by the Wyoming Stockgrowers' Association traveled by special train from Denver to Casper. Equipped with dynamite and a so-called Dead List of 70 names, it continued north toward Buffalo with the intention of blowing up the town and killing most of the inhabitants, starting with the sheriff. At the KC Ranch (now the town of Kaycee, Wyoming), they murdered two or three men on the list, but before they reached Buffalo were themselves surrounded by a counterforce from town and rescued by U.S. troops only minutes before the ranch house they were trapped in could be set afire by a flaming haywagon. (President Harrison was friendly with John Gray, the Scots chairman of one of the interested cattle companies.) As contemporary communities such as Saratoga, Jackson, and Sheridan suggest, a process of social and economic reversion seems to be overtaking the Equality State, where the natives are nearly flat broke or moved out following the wreck of the energy industry and the Great Buyup, working ranches being taken over by the megarich from all over America—indeed, all over the world. Around Laramie, too, the old ranchers are being dispossessed and replaced—by, among others, a Wal-Mart heir who has

acquired already some 700,000 acres (“to run cattle on”) and is said to want to make it an even million. Little billionaires never grow up; they just buy other, more expensive toys.

Because, after nearly 20 years' residency in Wyoming, I had never visited the capital of the state, and also because it's *there*, I drove 44 miles east across the Laramie Mountains to Cheyenne. Frontier Days, claimed by the city fathers to be not just the first but the longest-running rodeo in captivity (the claim is disputed by at least a couple of other contenders), was just getting under way, a special train from Denver pulling in, but even Frontier Days wasn't enough to make Cheyenne look good. The town is a dump (there's something about political cities) of 50,000 people (add another 50,000 up for the rodeo, minus a couple of thousand inhabitants smart enough to leave town for the week), depressing to look at, hot, surrounded by missile silos and grass, whose best-known feature apart from the disappointing state capitol building is the Hitching Post Lounge beside the Union Pacific tracks where, while the legislature is in session in January and February, politicians and lobbyists gather for too many drinks and who knows what other amusements. (Wyoming's sole contribution to the U.S. House of Representatives, Barbara Cubin, while a member of the state body is supposed to have taken surreptitious snapshots of her male colleagues' crotches, then posted the series on a bulletin board: Can you pin this tail on the right horse's ass . . . ?) I stopped in for a beer at the lounge, a lurid establishment in crimson-and-black, with rodeo photos on the walls and barstools upholstered like black-and-white cows, where a country-western band in mufti (T-shirts and jeans instead of cowboy shirts and hats) was rehearsing for the evening performance. Rock music is unadulterated evil, C&W just junk. Years ago, when I was learning to become a Westerner, I thought I liked some of it. Two decades later, I know better than to swallow any culture whole. In America today, you have to design and live your own culture: red wine and wilderness, hunting and books, horses and Haydn, making for happiness, if not popularity. I finished the beer and put two bits down on the bar. Leaving Cheyenne is the best way to see the place.

The horses had each dropped a shoe I discovered next day, the mare from her

near front hoof, the gelding from his off front one. The farrier recommended to me was Roger Lorenzi, a local brand inspector. He turned out to be the son of Winnie and Orion Lorenzi of Kemmerer, so we hung off the tailgate of his truck for an hour after the shoeing was done, swapping stories of snowed-in hunting camps in the Wyoming and sheep camps in the Salt River Range. In Wyoming, which is just 465,000 people spread over 97,000 square miles, if you have friends in one town, you've got friends in all of them.

Newly shod and hogfat from the green grass they'd eaten since arriving from New Mexico, the horses were ready for the mountains—the *real* mountains—again. We begin with a warm-up: seven or eight miles into the foothills above Centennial. Unslowed by 200 pounds of excess weight, the gelding stepped out briskly, his hooves ringing briskly on the hollow ground between the tree roots: glad to be home again and doing what a horse likes to do (sometimes) as we climbed upward through the still lodgepole forest broken by sagebrush parks lifting above the tops of the pine trees. In the parks, I rode through the edge of quaking aspen and dismounted to search for elk sign and to pick a small bouquet of summer flowers—bluebells, Indian paintbrush, larkspur, lupin, the delicate, basin-shaped lilies whose name I didn't remember—for Renée Williams, a friend left behind in Las Cruces, where I hoped some final expiring fragrance of the northern mountains would reach her yet. From a rocky knoll, the high peaks to the west were hidden by dark green intervening ridges, but the steep long bulk of Sheep Mountain was visible to the east and so was the tawny Laramie Plain, stretching away in slanting sunlight and the dark shadow of afternoon storm clouds. Thunder echoed in the hills, a cold breeze rose, and it seemed to me, sitting the horse and staring down toward the fenced pastures and scattered houses of Centennial, that after nearly two mispent years in New Mexico, everything was finally back the way it should be—the way it was meant to be. Except I was facing in the wrong direction, east toward the High Plains rather than west to the thick granite spine of the North American Continent. Come August, when the snow finally melts out of the high country, we'll fix that, too.

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Foreword by John Alvis

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John Milton (1608–1674) was the author also of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and served as Latin secretary to Oliver Cromwell during the Commonwealth.

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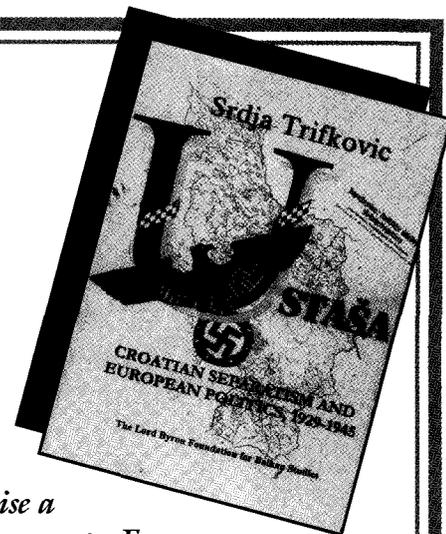
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USTAŠA: CROATIAN SEPARATISM AND EUROPEAN POLITICS, 1929-1945

By Srdja Trifkovic

(London and Aiken, SC: The Lord Byron Foundation;
323 pp.; \$19.00; ISBN 1-892478-01-3)



Nations cannot be invented, but even authentic nations, in asserting their identities, often rely on myths and down-right lies. Up to a point such myths are harmless and exercise a positive influence. But nationalist myths are not always naive or innocent. Every nation has a record of high crimes and misdemeanors.

The Croats are in a similar position, but their crimes against Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies, because they are more recent, are mixed almost inextricably with the myth-making of Croatian nationalism. The record of Croatian atrocities committed during the brief period of the Ustaša state should speak for itself. Unfortunately, that record has been obscured for a variety of reasons. But nations are nourished on truth, not lies, and the peoples of the Balkans—and those who would presume to tell them how to live—have an urgent need of the truth that only historical scholarship can provide.

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The path to sanity and maturity, both in the Balkans and in America, must be blazed by scholars and writers who have the courage and stamina to recover the past. That is why this book is so important.

—From the foreword by Dr. Thomas Fleming

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