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Books of The Times

By CHARLES POORE

THE United States is becoming a rather crowded place. Distinguished authorities warn us that we're all going to be standing on one another's heads soon. Or pretty soon, anyway.

And if you travel around the country, viewing urban sprawls and new communities and all that, you will realize how right those saddened savants are. The wide open spaces are narrowing at an alarming rate.

There are many approaches to the problems an exploding population presents. One of the most interesting is to read a wheeling-dealing and generally uproarious book by John Myers Myers, called "The Deaths of the Bravos."*

Mr. Myers is a lecturer and freelance writer who specializes in the history of the American West. Since he recently helped to assemble a representative collection of Western Americana for the library at the University of Arizona his mind seems to be systematically whirling with gaudy tales about the men who pushed the boundaries of the United States beyond the Mississippi and across the Rockies.

He shows here how we got the land we are crowding.

Would California grow more populous than New York State if those mountaineers and explorers, soldiers and pilgrims of the Santa Fe, the Oregon, and the other great trails, had never lived? Perhaps.

What Those Men Sought

A fashion in beaver hats, a desire for free land, the discovery of gold—all might have been postponed beyond their time.

But it is dramatically certain that—as things turned out—they hastened tremendously the process of explosive expansion. As David Lavender said in his memorable book, "Bent's Fort":

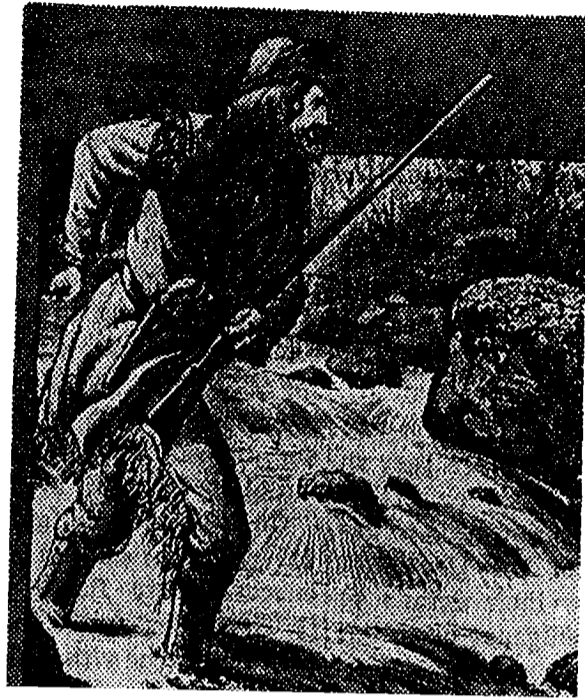
"Call the roll of the pathbreakers—Carson, Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, Maxwell, Walker, Wootton, Fitzpatrick of the broken hand, Frémont, and a forgotten host of others . . . they opened the Southwest." They were leading Bravos.

And they opened it with unlawful informality while much of that country still belonged to Spain or to Mexico—if not to the Indians—in one of the great land quarrels of Europe's heirs in the New World.

Mr. Myers's stimulating album of wanderers, trappers, fighters, politicians and pioneers makes us wonder what the United States would be like today if such Presidents as Jackson and Polk had not abetted the last Westward thrust that had its beginnings at Plymouth and Jamestown.

Would we be a middle-sized nation in a North America that held as many different nations as South America?

Under the odd rubric of his title Mr. Myers brings together an extraordinary diversity of men. The range is from Andrew Jackson to Wild Bill Hickok. It includes Senator Thomas Hart Benton, President Sam Houston of the Republic of Texas, the pirate



By W. M. Cary, reprinted from Harper's Weekly, Sept. 9, 1876

Jacket illustration for "The Deaths of the Bravos."

Jean Lafitte, Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Brigham Young, Captain Bonneville, Marcus Whitman, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, John Sutter, John Brown, and many, many more.

You may be a trifle surprised to see how devotedly Mr. Myers sticks to the actions of his cast of chosen characters no matter what is going on in the larger scene.

For example, his description of the Battle of Monterrey in the Mexican War might well leave you with the impression that it was chiefly a contest between the Texas Rangers and the armed forces of Mexico. As a sometime resident of Texas and Mexico, your reviewer was on familiar ground in contemplating that simplification. However, it should be admitted that elements of the United States Regular Army and such different non-Bravos as young Ulysses S. Grant and young Jefferson Davis were also strenuously active in the proceedings there.

Their Prophecy Fulfilled

Again, in considering the conquest of California, Mr. Myers has more kind words to say for John Charles Frémont than we have seen since Allan Nevins completed his humane portrait of that astonishing adventurer.

The men who roar through this book were in their own time often scarcely discernible in the big ranges of rocks and sand and uncharted wilderness.

"For most of them," Mr. Myers reminds us, "recognition of their national importance was postponed until they had been dead for anywhere from fifty to a hundred years. But as they had been remembered as men of mark in their own region, they had by then become citizens of tradition."

Citizens of tradition, creators of myth, figures of legend. And in their way they foretold the future uncannily. When the first straggling settlers appeared, the Bravos began to feel hemmed in. They'd say I told you so if they could see today's multitudes out there.

*THE DEATHS OF THE BRAVOS. By John Myers Myers. With endpaper maps. 467 pages. Little, Brown. \$6.95.