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How to Find the Real West in the Rockies

New York Times

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HOW TO FIND THE REAL WEST IN THE ROCKIES

BY MARSHALL SPRAGUE

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo.—To wheel over the high, hot plains to the Rocky Mountains for a summer vacation can be exhausting, and possibly many Easterners go home wondering why they had made the journey. They may feel that the jaunt cost too much and was not as stimulating, exotic, adventurous and instructive as they had hoped it would be. Perhaps they suspect that they would have been as well off if they had stayed home raising hollyhocks and touring to the Statue of Liberty or the Bronx Zoo.

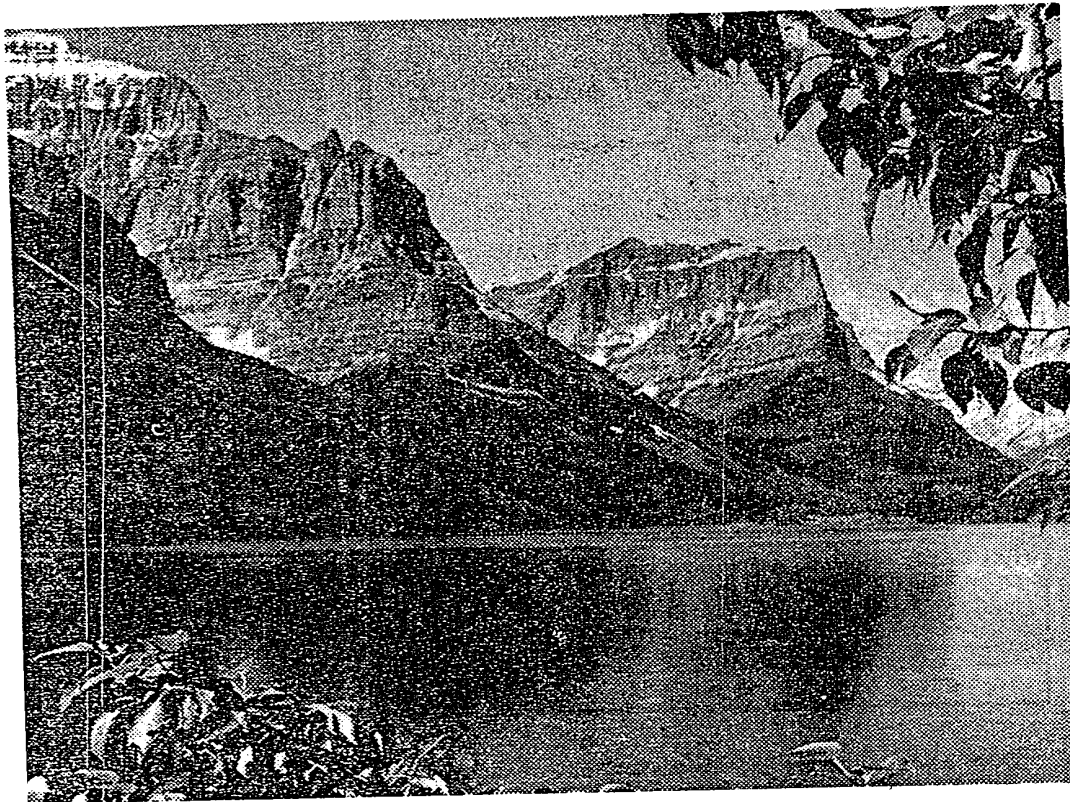
What was their trouble? Probably they really wanted to see the West the way it looks in the Western films, but all they allowed themselves to see during their 5,000-mile trek was more of the familiar East in a blurred Western setting.

It is an old habit. When those tremendous tourists, Lewis and Clark, poled up the Missouri in 1804-5 they were determined to make that sandy trickle behave just like the beautiful Ohio. Lewis was in love with a folding boat-frame of his own invention for floating down the Columbia. It broke his heart to have to dump it as useless at Three Forks, some 700 miles before he even got to the prospective launching place. Up to that point he had refused to accept this Wild West in its own peculiar terms of scarce water, infinite distance, high altitude and irrational topography.

Knick-Knacks

The Oregon Trail emigrants piled their wagons high with foolish New England knick-knacks so that they would not be homesick. As Earl Pomeroy points out in his fine book "In Search of the Golden West," the palace-car tourists of the Eighteen Seventies hardly saw the mountains. They wanted Western hotels modeled after those at Saratoga and Long Island polo games and Virginia fox hunts.

A University of Colorado research group suggests that seven out of ten Rocky Mountain tourists today are just like their great-grandparents. They flock willy-nilly to the Broadmoor at Colorado Springs or the Stanley at Estes Park or the Colorado at Glenwood Springs or La Fonda in Santa Fe. They yacht on Grand Lake's pint-sized waterway, cheer the Central City opera and digest Great Books at Aspen. They overcrowd the heated swimming pools, the asphalt tennis courts, the irrigated golf courses, the horse shows—all of which are transplanted Eastern affairs, artificially maintained despite



the strong objections of the environment.

Residents in these regions enjoy and admire this Western-Eastern hodgepodge. But even more they like to load the station wagon or the jeep with maps, field glasses, trout flies, guide and history books and head for the hills. Why? Because, to them, the Rockies are the most spectacular and beautiful and interesting mountains on earth, and since most tourists do not know how or do not try to get into them, the dwellers here have half a million square miles pretty much to themselves. For that matter, visitors could have them too.

Fascinating Saga

Local history is helpful. The story of the West is fascinating and it makes people eager to see the places concerned. Reference books include Bernard DeVoto's authoritative Western trilogy; David Lavender's "Bent's Fort"; Mrs. Muriel S. Wolle's "Stampede to Timberline"; Robert M. Orme's "Guide to the Colorado Mountains"; Richard Pearl's "Rocks and Minerals" and other works; Roger Tory Peterson's "A Field Guide to Western Birds"; M. Walter Pesman's "Meet the Natives" (wildflower). One never knows when something wonderful will demand to be identified—a Western tanager, say, or a

curious plant called Little Red Elephant.

Fort Union, a vast brown brooding adobe ruin on the Santa Fe Trail in northeastern New Mexico is well worth a visit. For thirty years after the Mexican War it played the main role in the drama of all the Army posts of the Southwest. From Fort Union, one can proceed to Santa Fe and Taos, well-preserved relics of centuries ago when Spain's two majesties of King and Church could still hope to conquer the world.

From Taos one can drive north into Colorado's peak-girdled San Luis Valley to see the re-created stockade of cottonwood poles where Zebulon Pike and his men were arrested in 1807 for trespassing on Spanish soil.

Far to the north, Montana contains the three forks of the Upper Missouri which Lewis and Clark named the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers in honor of the President and the two Cabinet Ministers who sponsored their epochal journey. Dropping down into Wyoming, one encounters the Green River and the sites of those joyful rendezvous of the Eighteen Thirties when Jed Smith and Jim Bridger, Captain Bonneville and Kit Carson and hundreds of Plains Indians met in the meadows to trade and brawl and gamble.

mental Divide is crossed on U. S. 26-287 over Togwotee Pass which the incredible lone wolf of the trails, John Colter, used in 1808 when he became the first white man to gaze at Yellowstone's natural wonders.

Such places as those mentioned should serve almost any special interest—scenery, recreation, geology, peace and quiet or whatever else one has in mind. There are fat trout on White River in Colorado at the site of the Meeker Massacre in 1879. No views in the Rockies are more spectacular than those seen from the rotting porches of homes in high ghost towns such as Crystal or Ashcroft in the Elk Mountains near Aspen, or St. Elmo and Tincup under Mount Princeton, or Hahn's Peak above Steamboat Springs, Colo.

There are also fascinating not-quite-ghost towns. So much of Cripple Creek remains under Pikes Peak that it is easy to imagine how it was in its fantastic heyday. Central City's steep crooked streets and architecture have an endless enchantment. Far over on the Western Slope are those still lively centers of the silver-and-gold excitement of the Eighteen Seventies—Telluride and Ouray and Silverton. At the top of the world in central Colorado is Leadville, still fairly well preserved.

Loveliest Drive

What is the loveliest drive in the Rockies? Some say that nothing equals a passage through Glacier National Park in Montana. Some nominate the Teton-shadowed roads of the Jackson Hole country in Wyoming. One can list a hundred Colorado favorites, among them the Western descent of Wolf Creek Pass during the last week in September, the snow-bound Collegiates in December, the Roaring Fork or Fryer Pan near Aspen at any season.

And recreation? One might take a fortnight in a motel at Lake City, spending the days trout fishing on Henson or Cebolla Creeks or up the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, and the nights in the Log Cabin Cafe listening to the old-timers telling tall tales. Or one might make a pack trip out of Steamboat Springs, of two or three weeks into the utter wilderness of Routt National Forest where the elk come close to the tent at night and any short walk may lead steps falling where no human ever trod before.

All such experiences are available, if one comes to the West to see and enjoy it as it is, not as the movies say, or in terms of uncharacteristic urbanity.

There is a fine collection of historic mountain passes out here, including the Raton on the Colorado-New Mexico line. As early as 1706, and maybe before then, Spanish soldiers were trooping over Raton from Santa Fe to block invasion from the Arkansas River by imaginary Frenchmen.

On his summer circuit, an Easterner might well inspect the most famous of them all, South Pass in Wyoming, which had to be found before the Oregon Trail could exist. South Pass may have been discovered in 1812 by Robert Stuart, one of John Jacob Astor's men, or perhaps later by Ashley's trappers.

Indian Passes

One might park a while near Missoula, Mont. This university town in the Bitterroot Valley should be a perfect place from which to reconnoiter all those great Indian passes which Lewis and Clark found for the civilized world—Lemhi and Lost Trail, Lolo, Lewis and Clark, Gibbon Pass, and perhaps Bozeman Pass.

Of course, passes are best surmounted in a jeep. It may be needed to get over places like Union Pass, just south of Yellowstone, which Wilson Price Hunt probably traversed in 1812 while pioneering a Pacific route safe from the scalping tendencies of the Blackfoot Indians. Near Union the Conti-