

## Richard Tillinghast

### Eastward Bound, Across a Storied Landscape

LEAVING PORTLAND, WITH ITS MICROBREWERIES, PACIFIC RIM restaurants, lumberjack chic, and drive-through coffee stations, I drove east along the Columbia River Gorge on the first leg of a four-thousand-mile trip that would take me to northern Michigan and then down to South Carolina and Tennessee. The Gorge's mist-wreathed granite cliffs, rising above the onrush of the Columbia River, look as though they could have been painted by a Chinese landscape artist from the Tang Dynasty. In late-afternoon light the stone takes on a purple glow. Taoist hermits might be meditating in caves up in those hills.

Above White Salmon, Washington, where I spent my first night, pioneer days had not, it seemed, entirely ended. As I drove up precipitous roads that reached up from the Columbia River to my nephew's house, where I would spend the night, some of the hillsides had that desolate, shredded look that follows clear-cutting. One little house partway up, a shack really, was flanked on one side by a pile of rough-cut logs, each about the length of an American car from the fifties. It looked as though the householder had wrangled them there for sizing into smaller chunks as fuel was needed during the long winter. The month was May, but a cutting wind sliced across the steep hills. My nephew and I took his son, six years old, to his baseball game down in the town of White Salmon. The diamond, with its boys' and girls' coach-pitch three-inning game, and the pure Americanness of the scene, were thrown into perspective by the massive, timeless hills, verdant with the spring rains, towering above it.

The following morning I woke at five in the rough-hewn guest house my nephew had built behind his vegetable garden. No one in the household was stirring; the rooster crowed as I pulled out. Once I had descended the hill back to White Salmon, with a cup of tea from Starbucks in the cup-holder between the seats of my Honda and morning news from National Public Radio as a soundtrack, I drove along the Columbia River on Interstate 84, then veered south on US-97. The road was free of traffic, except for the occasional truck, and was surrounded by vast acreage, big ranches with sparse cattle grazing the big rounded hills. Somewhere along the way I became aware that the needle on my gas gauge was dropping low. The day was cold, rain whipped across the highway. I turned hopefully into what looked like a kind of filling station beside the road where a yellow school bus was fueling.

The bus left just as I pulled in beside a truck with “Explosives. Drilling Equipment” painted on the driver’s door. The driver, a weather-beaten man of about fifty with a broad gray moustache, was talking on his phone. “Naw,” he was saying loudly to the person on the other end of the conversation, “you have to yank out right smart on the throttle as soon as you start her.” As he stepped out of the cab to talk to me, I couldn’t help but notice the large box of Trojans on the seat beside him, and I considered their relevance to the business the truck advertised.

This man cheerfully informed me that the gas pumps were accessible only if you had a certain kind of card. How far was the nearest gas station? In Madras, he said, pronouncing the name with flat American vowels, emphasizing the first syllable in a way purely innocent of the city in India. How far is that? I pursued. Forty miles south. Oh hell, I said confidently, I can go forty miles, and got back into my car, leaving him to his explosives and his Trojans.

It was not reassuring to see a sign less than a mile farther along that said “Madras, 56 miles.” The needle touched the empty mark. I began to worry, and then for brief periods managed to convince myself of the beauty of living in the moment. And the scenery *was* gorgeous—vast ranchland with few houses and the occasional stock pen fashioned from fieldstone and rough-cut logs, gates opening onto roads that appeared to lead nowhere except off into the empty hills. A sign announced, “Elk Crossing.”

Not a good place to run out of gas. Elk appeared to be the theme, as an Adopt a Highway sign let drivers know that this stretch of road was cared for by the Madras Elks Club. Good to know. My low-fuel gauge lit up just then, and I tried to calculate how much gas I really did have left. After climbing to a considerable altitude, the road began to slope downhill, and I cut my engine, put the Honda into neutral, and coasted for long distances. I have seldom been so glad to see a town as I was to see Madras, which I now delightedly pronounced to myself in the vernacular. There was only a tenth of a gallon left in my tank.

Just north of Bend, Oregon, the terrain became high desert—barren fields with wind-stunted cedars, sagebrush, and rocky outcroppings. I turned east through the pleasant, prosperous town of Bend on highway 20, a two-lane route that bisects the state laterally all the way to the Idaho border. Rain whipped across the road, and then—what were those broad, feathery drops—snowflakes? Yes, snowflakes, and this was the twenty-second of May. Then peppery shots of sleet, or was that hail? Whatever it was, I didn’t like the look of it, even with good tires and a full tank of gas. This is not the sort of place you’d want to have to cope with a blizzard—easily possible, common even, in the high desert.

The road climbed to over 4,500 feet. I was glad to reach Burns, the only town of any size along this stretch of Highway 20. This is cattle country, and into the McDonald’s where I was having lunch three ranch hands in cowboy boots asserted themselves, jeans stained with mud, one in a battered cowboy hat, the other two wearing the baseball cap that is preferred headgear throughout most of America. Their conversation was of the price of livestock.

Like many American communities, the town of Burns appears to have been the creation of one man. George McGowan, an early settler and merchant, named the city not after himself, as he might have felt entitled to do, but after Robert Burns, whom McGowan admired as a poet of the common man. Within its first decade Burns had acquired stores, a post office, and a couple of hotels. McGowan himself was the town's first postmaster. In its early years, mining and lumber brought settlers to this remote part of Oregon. But cattle ranching was introduced to the region as early as the 1860s and flourished after passage of the Desert Land Act of 1877, which made 320-acre plots available to hardy souls who would "reclaim, irrigate, and cultivate" the land. Cattle, hay, and horses remain the main commodities bought and sold in Burns.

I stopped for the night at the Silver Spur Motel, mainly by virtue of the name. When I opened the little rear window of my room, I found I was looking into someone's backyard. An old man who walked with difficulty was splitting kindling on the stump of what must once have been a huge tree right behind his house, a frontier dwelling faced with rough-cut sections of logs chinked inexpertly with cement, the roof shingled with rusty sections of tin overlapping one another.

Projecting from the back of the house proper was a shed, fashioned of big blocks of the same stone used in the stock shelters I'd seen along the highway. Most likely the stone shed had been built first, with the log house added later. To satisfy my curiosity, the next morning before leaving Burns I drove around to the little street behind the motel and discovered that the front of the house was a comparatively modern-looking clapboard structure. This single house encompassed all of Burns's modest architectural history.

Bikers like to ride Highway 20, and the Silver Spur is a popular hostelry for them. As I was typing this, several rugged shaved-head men roared up. When they dismounted, I saw that one man was missing a leg. King of the road on his hog, he walked unmounted with an aluminum crutch—no less cocky, though, in his gray goatee and studded leather jacket emblazoned with his club's standard, a red heart radiating with spokes.

Every now and then one stumbles into a really good restaurant along the road. The one where I ate that night was a throwback to the 1950s. First the waitress—an energetic woman in her early thirties—brought out a little shrimp cocktail on a bed of shredded iceberg lettuce. Next came a bowl of peppery chili and an undistinguished salad—forgivable within the context of the cold IPA they had on draft—followed by a 12-ounce top-round steak, seared but genuinely rare, next to a big baked potato topped with sour cream and butter. The best kind of old-fashioned American restaurant meal.

After that meal, a baseball game in my motel room would've been just the thing, but instead I found a TV show called *Unsolved*. This episode was all about UFOs. Apparently a Frisbee-shaped aircraft had come down from the sky and

landed on a remote blacktop road in New Mexico. A local couple witnessed the landing, which left a circular burned spot on the pavement. When they went there the next day with their camera for a second look, what do you think they found? Well, someone had come along with a truckload of asphalt and repaved the road. There was no sign at all of the landing. My goodness!



The West is its own distinct place. As you drive from progressive coastal Oregon and Washington, the political climate shades from blue to red. “Get the US out of the UN,” a billboard demands. Proceeding east on four-lane interstates through Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming, one retraces, in the opposite direction, the route that Lewis and Clark took on their expedition, the route that later became the Oregon Trail. The trail was so steep in places that the pioneers lashed ropes to trees so that wagons could be lowered down hills. Stinkingwater Creek and Bitter Creek tell a tale of thirst in an arid land.

Place names along the highway indicate that those days of struggle are not so very far behind us. Massacre Rocks near American Falls in Idaho, now a State Park that runs along the south bank of the Snake River, was also known the “Gate of Death” or “Devil’s Gate.” Passage through here was narrow, and emigrants making their way through on the Oregon Trail feared ambush by Indians. Settlers traveling in a convoy of five covered-wagon trains were attacked by Shoshoni on August 9–10, 1862. Ten emigrants died in the fight.

Names like Lodgepole and Medicine Bow are encrypted with the conflicting stories of settlers and Indians. Laramie takes its name from a French trader, Jacques LaRemie, who wandered into these hills in 1810 and was never heard from again. Cheyenne is named after a Native American tribe, but it is a cowboy town. These are mythical names. Even a tourist billboard for Cheyenne acknowledges it. “Live the Legend,” the sign advises. Another billboard announces, “We Buy Antlers. Top Dollar Paid,” and provides a toll-free number.

I descended from mountainous Idaho into Wyoming. Where did Wagonhound Road in western Wyoming get its name from? A little research told me that the territory around Wagonhound Road has played a role in western transportation since the earliest days of human activity in the Rocky Mountain west. Teepee rings from ten thousand years ago indicate that people have camped out here for centuries. In the 1850s one Captain Howard Stansbury led an expedition near here to scout out potential routes for the Union Pacific Railroad. In the 1860s a stagecoach route followed the trail from Elk Mountain through Rattlesnake Pass on the mountain’s north flank.

But why “Wagonhound”? From the sound of it, the name must’ve been a corruption of some other word, German maybe. Yet I pictured a hungry dog slinking around the wagon trains looking for food.

To get a feeling for the history of Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming, and even of Nebraska farther to the east, I was traveling in the wrong direction. American

history is a westward-moving phenomenon, and the distances are so great that roads become both necessities and icons. It is a horizontal landscape. Freight trains are long and frequent. High desert terrain gives way eastward to high plains, to arable land planted with alfalfa and winter wheat. Tractors plowing for the spring planting kick up clouds of dust.

As one enters Wyoming, one becomes more aware of the sky. It stretches vast and broad as the landscape flattens out. In her writing, Annie Proulx has put her stamp on this part of the West, and I thought of her descriptions as I drove east along I-80:

The country appeared as empty ground, big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, intricate sky, flocks of small birds like packs of cards thrown up in the air, and a faint track drifting toward the red-walled horizon. Graves were unmarked, fallen house timbers and corrals burned up in old campfires. Nothing much but weather and distance, the distance punctuated once in a while by ranch gates, and to the north the endless murmur and sun-flash of semis rolling along the interstate.

Driving these distances as part of that endless murmur and sun-flash, one provides one's own soundtrack, either from local radio or from the car stereo. Coming down 97 through Oregon I listened to Neil Young. His western intonation and the beautiful naïveté of his high register all fit the countryside I was driving through. At a certain point during any road trip I also need to listen to Willie Nelson—he knows what it is like to be on the road again—and once or twice on these road trips I've even managed to synchronize the Band's singing "Across the Great Divide" with crossing the Continental Divide. Gram Parsons is another musical presence for me whenever I get out on the highway:

I headed west to grow up with the country,  
Crossed those prairies with those waves of grain.  
And I saw my devil, and I saw my deep blue sea,  
And I thought about a calico bonnet from Cheyenne to Tennessee.

We flew straight across that river bridge  
Last night half-past two.  
The switchman waved his lantern goodbye and good day  
As we went rolling through.  
Billboards and truck stops passed by the grievous angel,  
And now I know just what I have to do.

But classical music fits this majestic landscape too. There's nothing like passing eighteen-wheelers at ninety miles per hour while listening to the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth. My early-morning drive east out of Oregon from Burns was accompanied by the Brahms sextet number one in B-flat major, which was first published in 1862. While we were fighting our Civil War, Vienna and Paris were listening to new chamber music by Brahms.

I limped into Rawlins, Wyoming, late one afternoon after driving four or five hundred miles—hot, dehydrated, unshaven, and road-weary. Once I found a motel and had a wash, I set out to see what kind of town I had fetched up in. Rawlins, as the story goes, was named for John Aaron Rawlins, a general in the Civil War, who camped here a couple of years after the Union victory, having moved west in search of dryer air on account of his tuberculosis.

Rawlins was also a stage for the last act in the life of the notorious George Parrott, “Big Nose George,” who also went by the names of George Manuse and George Warden. It’s a story so truly western and bizarre that no Hollywood scriptwriter sitting by the pool in Beverly Hills could have invented it. Big Nose George was an outlaw and cattle rustler who was hanged in 1881 in Rawlins by a lynch mob, the year of the town’s founding. Perhaps the town’s incorporation and the rough justice administered to the outlaw were signs of Rawlins’s coming of age as a civilized community

In 1878, Parrott and his gang had murdered two law enforcement officers—Wyoming deputy sheriff Robert Widdowfield and Tip Vincent, a detective for the Union Pacific Railway—while trying to escape following a train robbery on a remote stretch of track along the Medicine Bow River that had not gone according to plan. On orders to track down Parrott’s gang, Widdowfield and Vincent found the outlaws on a hot August day in 1878 camped at Rattlesnake Canyon, not far from Wagonhound Road near Elk Mountain. One of the gang who had been posted as a lookout saw the lawmen coming and alerted his companions. The robbers stamped out their fire and hid in the brush, guns drawn.

When Widdowfield and Vincent arrived at the scene and had a look around, they quickly realized that the ashes of the fire were still hot. Just as they started to look for the outlaws, the gang opened fire and Widdowfield was shot in the face. Vincent tried to escape but was shot before he made it out of the canyon. The gang stole both men’s weapons and horses, then covered up the bodies and fled. The murder of the two lawmen was quickly discovered and a ten-thousand-dollar reward was offered for their capture.

In February 1879, Big Nose George and his cohort found themselves in Milestown, Montana. Word had gotten around the saloons, livery stables, and warehouses of Milestone that a man named Morris Cahn, a local merchant, would be taking money east on a buying trip to replenish his stock of merchandise. Cahn was traveling in a heavily armed convoy with an ambulance and a wagon from Fort Keogh, guarded by fifteen soldiers and two officers who were on their way to collect the army payroll. Having heard the news, Big Nose George, his sidekick Charlie Burris, also known as “Dutch Charlie,” and two other outlaws set out to ambush and overpower this formidable assemblage in a deep ravine now known as Cahn’s Coulee, near a crossing of the Powder River in Montana.

It seems that the soldiers, the ambulance, and the wagon got strung out along the trail. The gang, wearing masks, were waiting at a bend in the trail at the bottom of the coulee. They surprised and captured the vanguard of soldiers,

and then seized the ambulance with Cahn and the officers. Having accomplished this, they lay in wait for the rest of the soldiers with the wagon. Accounts vary, but it appears that Big Nose George relieved Cahn of somewhere between \$3,600 and \$14,000—a lot of money back in those days.

In 1880, following the robbery, the law caught up with Big Nose George Parrott and Charlie Burris in Miles City, after Big Nose and Dutch Charlie got drunk and boasted of killing the two Wyoming lawmen. Parrott was brought back to face murder charges in Wyoming. A jury sentenced him to hang on April 2, 1881, but, always resourceful, George tried to escape while being held at a jail in Rawlins. He filed the rivets of the heavy shackles on his ankles, using a pocketknife and a piece of sandstone. Having removed his shackles, he hid in the washroom until the jailor, a man named Rankin, came to check on him. Parrott struck the jailor over the head with his shackles, fracturing his skull. Rankin managed to fight back and call to his wife, Rosa, for help.

Flourishing a pistol, Rosa persuaded Parrott to return to his cell. Once news of the escape attempt spread through Rawlins, a couple hundred people assembled outside the little jail. While Rankin lay recovering, masked men with pistols burst into the jail. Holding Rankin at gunpoint, they took his keys, then dragged Parrott from his cell and strung him up from a telegraph pole. Charlie Burris met with a similar fate not long after his capture. He was being returned to Rawlins for trial when a group of locals found him hiding in a baggage compartment and hanged him from the crossbeam of a nearby telegraph pole.

But the story does not end there. The doctors who took possession of the corpse decided they wanted to study Big Nose's brain in hopes of gaining insight into the mind of an outlaw. So they sawed off the top of Parrott's skull, the cap of which they presented to fifteen-year-old Lillian Heath, who was then a medical assistant to one of the doctors in town. Heath went on to become the first female doctor in Wyoming and is said to have used the cap—depending on her mood, I suppose—as an ashtray, a pen holder, and a doorstep. Someone also made a death mask of Parrott, and skin from his thighs and chest was removed.

The skin, including, we are told, the dead man's nipples, was sent to a tannery in Denver, where some leather worker made it into a pair of shoes and a medical bag. These items were kept by one of the doctors, John Eugene Osborne, who wore the shoes to his inaugural ball after being elected as the first Democratic Governor of Colorado. But that still wasn't the end of Big Nose. Parrott's dismembered body was stored in a whiskey barrel filled with a salt solution for about a year, while these resourceful medical men continued to run experiments on him, until finally he was buried in the yard behind the doctor's office.

In 1950, while working on the Rawlins National Bank on Cedar Street, construction workers unearthed a whiskey barrel filled with bones. Inside the barrel was a skull with the top sawed off, and the shoes said to have been made from skin from Parrott's thighs. Dr. Lillian Heath, then in her eighties, was contacted and the skull cap from her office was sent to the scene. It was found to fit the skull in the barrel perfectly. DNA testing later confirmed that the remains

were indeed those of Big Nose George.

Today the shoes fashioned from the skin of Big Nose George are on permanent display at the Carbon County Museum in Rawlins, together with the bottom part of the outlaw's skull and Big Nose George's earless death mask. The shackles used during the hanging of the outlaw, as well as the skull cap, are on show at the Union Pacific Museum in Omaha. The medicine bag made from his skin has never been found.



The mountain peaks are dusted with snow that persists well into May, but the journey east is a descent, and not just topographically. The heroic West of the pioneers on the Oregon Trail, and the outlandish West of outlaws and lawmen, receded as I drove eastward. No more rock formations, no more sand and sagebrush, no more cowboys having lunch at McDonald's, no more blast and drilling equipment men driving the hills of eastern Oregon with a box of Trojans on the seat beside them.

Spring gave way to summer as I drove, and with summer came the heavy Midwestern rains. The pastures glowed emerald green, and in fields that had already been sown, the young plants, too, were green. I felt more relaxed now that I had passed beyond the rocky aridity of the West. This spring greenery refreshes the traveler's spirit, the highway is easier to drive, as pickup trucks with gun racks and horse trailers give way to cars with "Baby on Board" stickers on their rear windshields.

There is still something untamed about Nebraska, at least through the western part of it. Nebraska is, after all, the home state of John Wayne. But about halfway through the state, the West gives way, with great regret it seems to me, to the Midwest. As I traveled east on I-80, I saw that more land was plowed now, and grain elevators rose against the cloudless sky. Then suddenly my nostrils were assaulted by a noxious stench. A few hundred yards farther along, I found the source of it. Penned-up cattle, several acres of them, milled around dispiritedly inside their fences. One of the worst smells in the West: beef for American steakhouses.

Passing from Iowa into western Illinois, I crossed the Mississippi River. Cole Porter's song "Don't Fence Me In," which my mother used to play on the piano, includes the lines, "I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences, / Gaze at the moon till I lose my senses." Run that sentiment backward and you're on the freeway in Illinois, skirting around the edge of Chicago, heading sensibly east through ever-coagulating traffic.