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Worldviews And The American West

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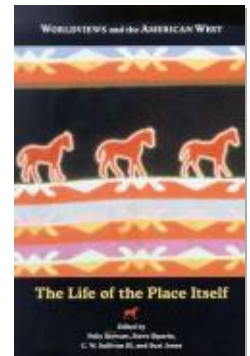
Published by Utah State University Press

Stewart, Polly.

Worldviews And The American West: The Life of the Place Itself.

Utah State University Press, 2000.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9254.



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Local Character

Kim Stafford

Gypsy Slim taught me why each town's outcast eccentric is its patron saint. Until he disappeared, Slim camped by the downtown library in Portland. His plastic tarp stretched between two shopping carts and the stone bench carved with the name of that rebel from the Enlightenment, Laurence Sterne. When citizens would clip along past him, haughty with respectability, Gypsy Slim would jive them with an easy line of talk, until he had them stalled long enough for a real earful: "I don't care if it's family, friend, house, job, creed, ethnic group, country, institution, or sex—they all try to stifle what you can be." Then his saxophone would wrangle their hearts for yes or no.

In every Oregon town where I live or camp, I hear stories about these local saints: Kid Gilnap in Junction City, with his jingling vest of bells; the Eugene man who had his name legally changed to Pro Human so he could flatter and counsel the young; Bottle Mary, west from Otis, who lived on returnable bottles other citizens knew to leave for her behind a particular stump; Wallowa County's own Acy Deucey; Abe Johnson of Redmond; Tubby Beers of Swisshome; and Marge, the gatherer of mushrooms near Florence. As Gypsy Slim explained, these most unorthodox lives become a standard for the rest of us—not a particular way for us all to live, but a sternly individual standard to measure the various lives we lead. The hermit belongs to this ground. Separate from family and career and church and school, this shabby genius becomes the life of the place itself. The tramp passes on; this life stays. A tattered American flag flaps lazily from a branch of cottonwood near Celilo. When the eastbound freight thunders past, a gray hand flickers from the shadows to wave.

The saint dwells alone in a house or camp that defies the surface formalities of the town. Being alone, she or he is uniquely visible to the community, and uniquely free to live out some kind of wishing we cannot. Sweet paradox: the local character is independent of the codes we live by and by this independence is free to honor some deeper code or devotion that we—in our upright ways—believe but cannot express. This may be a devotion to

a submerged traditional culture, to the past, to the vulnerable creatures of the natural world, or to the plain dignity of the slow mind.

Friends told me to watch for Acy Deucy, his big black hat sagging over his shoulders, as he walked toward Wallowa from his cabin twenty miles out. He'd come slouching along the country road each Saturday afternoon, with a local river's easy tread. And we traded stories at his expense—about the summer shack where he lived desperate summer and winter high on Promise Ridge, or about the time the harvest cook put two cups of salt into the cake by accident. Acy was a good harvest hand and first to the table. He gobbled up the cake without a flinch. In a word, the man is slow. For this, he is in everyone's care. He is the local character helping the citizens of Wallowa measure their responsibilities.

They say that once at a City Council meeting, Acy Deucy came up on the agenda. As I heard the story several times in Wallowa (where word travels fast and often), Acy's custom was to walk into town Saturday, celebrate until he could barely stand, then sleep it off in the fire station and walk home to Promise on Sunday. For the City Council, this routine became grave.

"When he pulls out those hoses to make a nest for himself," said one, "he jeopardizes the response time of the crew. If they get a call on a Saturday night, they'll have to untangle him before they can jump on the truck and go."

"I've been thinking on that," said another. "When you're talking fire, you're talking life and death. Let's lock the station so he can't get in. I've tried, but you can't reason with that man on a Saturday night."

"If we leave the door open to Acy," a third replied, "we *might* lose a house or even a life to a fire; if we lock the door, we will *surely* lose Acy to the cold. The man will freeze."

They all thought for a time, and then voted to leave the door open as it had been. And there Acy sleeps every Saturday night.

The obvious solution of leaving a mattress or blanket in the fire station for Acy's use never occurred in the several versions of this story I heard. Nor did I ever meet anyone who had actually attended the council meeting where this discussion was supposed to have taken place. Whether the meeting occurred or not, however, the often-repeated account of the meeting serves as a parable for Wallowa residents. In this story the town sees itself playing a gamble of one life—no matter how peripheral and strange—against all the codes and procedures for public safety and efficiency.

One Saturday night I sat by Acy, his big hat hunched over the bar at Baird's Tavern. While the shuffleboard puck slid the length of its table on cornmeal, and two women leaned back to laugh about something one had whispered, while jacked-up cars rumbled slow as autumn down the street outside, Acy began to tell me about his dog, way out at the shack on Promise Ridge, waiting for his return.

“But these schools!” he said suddenly. “They’ll be our death!” The bar got quiet for a moment. He swirled the beer in his glass to center the foam, then drained it. “My dog,” he said softly, “my dog’s a good dog. He just waits inside that cabin no matter how long I’m gone.”

I first met Abe Johnson, the bird man of Cline Falls, in the Bend bus station. He had a fifty-pound sack of birdseed slung over his shoulder, a blue stocking cap on his head, and a smashed and greasy cowboy hat on top of that. The pockets on his long canvas coat were torn, and when he took a little jump to shift the load, corn and sunflower seeds scattered from his pockets onto the floor. He set his quart styrofoam cup of coffee onto the end of a crowded bench and began to talk. When everyone else turned away, he turned to me.

“It’s the inner-outer!” He raised his dirt-gloved hands in supplication toward me. “It’s empathy! That’s what makes the birds come in.” The woman hiding behind her novel glanced up. The kid in a black T-shirt with sleeves torn away looked over his shoulder from pinball. “Some days they don’t want to. They hop around in those trees like they’ll never come. But then. . . .” When Abe paused dramatically to straighten up, the sack fell off his shoulder and tipped the cup from its perch. As coffee ran like a gully-washer down the bench, two children, a ski bum, and an old lady leaped from the coffee’s path down the trough of polished oak, but Abe never noticed: “. . . then they come right here to my shoulder,” he said. “Right here!” He patted his left shoulder, and his face bloomed with joy toward an invisible chickadee. Between his pursed lips was a magic kernel of corn.

Someone appeared from the snack bar with a handful of paper napkins and began with loud sighs to mop coffee from the bench. The old lady picked up Abe’s empty cup, turned toward him with a chickadee’s deference, then set the cup on top of the newsstand beside him and retreated. The boy’s pinball game started to ring and jangle, and Abe brought his eyes into focus on me again.

“One time it was about ten degrees and snowing, but I wanted this magpie to come land on my back.” Abe bent down, and let his arms dangle like weeping willow vines. “Magpies are funny. They get it in their mind they won’t come, and stubborn!” Abe suddenly flung his arms outward and let out a screeching magpie oath.

“Skeee! Skeeee!” The old woman, twenty feet away across the lobby, backed two paces to the wall. Abe brought his hands up against his heart, and twisted his neck to face me. “That’s where the empathy comes. I started to feel it. Sweat dropped off my nose to the snow, I wanted it so bad. And ten degrees!” His fingers snapped into a prayer-clench, and his eyes closed. His lips trembled, then suddenly his eyes smiled open.

“There he came! That magpie didn’t want to, but he did. Landed right on my spine and stayed. Hopped around and squalled like he’d hit the

Promised Land.” Abe sat down on the sack of birdseed, but immediately they called the Portland bus and he struggled to his feet, swung the sack to his shoulder with a fast wheeze of breath, and ambled toward the gate.

As the bus headed north on Highway 97, headlights punching the dark, most passengers settled in for sleep. Or they pretended to. Abe snorted and leaned across the aisle toward me. “One time I was down on my belly for hours watching this beetle—little blue fella with knobby antlers. I followed him all afternoon and must have covered fifty feet in circles and zags. That little guy had to work! Watching him, you get to know what it’s like to flop onto your back and wrestle around trying to get up. I wanted to help him, but I couldn’t. Held a twig out once for him to grab, but then I pulled it away. I wasn’t his guardian, I was him! I forgot everything. Got soaked. Got stiff. Like I dozed, like hypnotized, like born bug! And all of a sudden, this crow lights on my shoulder, jumps down to snatch that beetle, and goes! I heard his beak crunch down, felt I was the one to die. Had a hard time getting up, too.”

Abe got off in Redmond, and I saw him flop his load into the basket of a tricycle with a license plate, and pedal west in the dark. He started slow but had achieved a steady, rambling rhythm by the time he left the pool of the station’s tungsten light.

It was later I read about this man in the news, talked with his neighbors, began to learn the complex relation he has with the human community as a result of his attention to the wild birds. I learned of his confrontation with the gravel company that wants to scoop rock from under the bird sanctuary he has been informally developing for twenty-five years. A lawyer has donated time to stall the gravel operation. A local car dealership gave the three-wheeled cycle I had seen him ride. So far, the dentist Abe approached has declined to fix his teeth so he can whistle the proper songs to bring in the birds, but community pressure will be on him to do so.

Abe’s work is not ranching or logging or transport or tourists or smoke jumping or any of the other mainstays of the Redmond community at large. His work is feeding the wild birds, diverting water from storm run-off to the trees they nest in, dragging home from the dump old appliances with which to fashion sculptural feed stations that invite the chickadees but keep the sparrows clear. For this, no matter how odd, he is a local saint.

One of his neighbors put it this way: When Abe stands like St. Francis—hands outstretched, a small bird on each palm, and the light of beatitude on his face, saying, “Here bird, here seed, come you little chatterbox”—anyone could see why others run interference for his needs in the world.

Several years after our meeting in Bend, I stepped through the juniper grove that surrounds his shack, calling out to warn him, “Mr. Johnson, are you there? Mr. Johnson, I met you once in Bend. Do you remember?” I stood before the shack and heard something fumble around inside. The door

scraped open a few inches and Abe's face appeared sideways. Then his hand reached out toward me holding a kettle of urine. He scowled.

"I don't like the look of that. Way too dark. What do you think?"

"It does look pretty dark," I said. "Hey, you were going to show me the birds."

"Birds?" His face, still sideways, softened to a toothless grin. "Give me a minute to get my boots on."

We carried on a shouted conversation through the door for close to a half hour while he sought the boots inside his box house, then he gave a mighty heave against the debris blocking the door, and got it pulled back far enough to slip through. He wore different hats this time, a short-billed hunter's cap and a tremendous broad-brimmed pilgrim affair on top. His pea-green coat sported six pockets bulging with seed that dribbled out when he twisted or bobbed to peer about. The zipper on his pants had failed, but two belts secured them, and the cuffs were stuffed into a pair of green rubber boots half a dozen sizes too large. Abe's sour fragrance trailed behind him like a river's fog, as he drifted through the tall grass before me from one feed station to the next.

"I came down from The Dalles in '48 to do potato harvest," he told me over his shoulder, "and stayed." He paused to smear a dab of peanut butter on the bark of a juniper tree well-darkened by his custom. "Been on this ground since." He led off again, this time toward a lone apple tree improbably alive among the dry-ground sage. Our path was not a line but a braid. We took the turnings of animals not intent to get somewhere but inquisitive to be everywhere. "There come sunflower." Abe pointed to a clump of dark green in the blond dead grass of July. "That's winterfood for chickadee. I haul it water from the river." We dropped into a ditch that led toward the apple tree. "I dug this ditch to pull the storm-water down off the rim. May lose that tree, though." The trunk stood on a little ring of flat ground Abe had sculpted for it. It had never been pruned or sprayed, living as Abe did by sheer intensity. There were no apples, and the tree didn't cast much shade. He put his hand on the trunk. "Woodpeckers starting to favor it. Bad sign."

The next feed station was an upright, cylindrical water heater laced with rust, with a stack of automobile brake drums on top. He lifted them down one by one, scattered fresh seed from his sack on a pan, then replaced the brake drums.

"These rims keep the sparrows off," he said, tapping the top brake drum with his fingernail. "They can't hang upside down and hop inside like a chickadee can. None of your upright birds can get in here. just chickadees, and snag bird—little wren."

There was a small wind beside my ear, and a chickadee lighted on Abe's left shoulder. Instantly, a sunflower seed appeared between his lips. The chickadee snatched it and was gone. The whole move between them

had the quick grace of something choreographed many chickadee generations back.

We paused at a dead refrigerator in a juniper tree's deep shade. The door handle was gone, but Abe thrust his thumb through the rusted hole where the handle had been, and the door popped open. He reached inside to replenish the seed in his pockets, then shut the door with his knee. We climbed the slope, which was jumbled with shards of basalt the size of cars haphazard in a wrecking yard, to the garden. Here Abe had hauled horse manure in sacks on his back to form a level ribbon of soil winding along the slope of lichen-brightened rock. He had planted sunflower, tomato, potato, and corn, and from a cleft behind an old juniper he took a hoe and began to weed.

I sat in the shade and watched. My camera seemed the toy of another century. My hands were too clean to coax leaves from rock, as Abe did. In his hands, a rusted coffee can mended with pitch was Paleolithic. The day went dumb with calm. As he reached up to handle a flower head, his face was Inca. His coat was tree bark a wren searched for stray seed. Here at the place Abe lived, I was like other ungainly citizens of the modern bus ride. In this garden, we were the strange ones. On this earth, on his home ground, I was apprentice to Abe.

Over on the wet side, mossy deep in the coast range west from Eugene, Tubby Beers lived on Indian Creek with his team of Percherons, and his World War II tank for gypo logging parked in the front yard. The tank's turret had been removed, and in its place a home-welded boom of steel was hinged for swivel-work yarding logs. Tubby said with that rig he didn't need roads. "Long as I'm in second-growth, I go anywhere I want. Course, if I want to be gentle about it, I use the horses. They don't leave more skid trail than a short-tailed rainstorm."

Tubby himself had to step sideways through some doors, and it's hard to believe he ever died. He seemed too vibrant to slip through the frame of a grave and be gone.

Inside the house that day, when a big laugh closed his eyes and I could frankly glance around, my gaze swept the world map taped to the ceiling; the fiddle, mandolin, and guitar hung handy on the wall; the eight stuffed animals crouching hospitably at eye-level on the living room shelf—bear, skunk, weasel, and related kin. The tribe of the wild lived inside Tubby's mind.

"There were seven men there that day," he began in a rush, "and they're all dead and my daddy told me and I'm the only one that knows." In the wake of those words could be the story of Tubby's Uncle Mike riding with Jesse James. Or Uncle Frank serving as Teddy Roosevelt's personal body-guard in the battle of San Juan Hill. Or the Beers family fife and drum corps parting the sea of buffalo as they crossed the plains by wagon. Or a tale of

Tubby's own shenanigans at rodeos and logging shows and other lively celebrations, of Saturday nights riding his horse and roaring wild up-canyon from the Indianola Bar, blasting the sky with his guns for joy.

This time it was none of those. It was the tale of Madera's Grave, the story of a strange and crazy man who was saint in this place before Tubby was born. Lyman Madera built his cabin without a door, as Tubby told it, and had to climb in through a hole in the roof each night to sleep. He lost his son, he prayed, he died with a mountain named for him. That was all. After the story, Tubby plucked his guitar from the wall and prepared to sing.

"Don't write this down," he said, tuning up. "I just want you listening." The song was a terrible fervent thing about the Japs and honor and the flag and our young people today. His tear-filled eyes held mine.

Tubby lived alone, and all his love of things old or musical or wild showed around the house and yard: the five pair of cowboy boots muddy around the stove to dry—all his; the saddle flung over the porch rail; the Percherons sidling eagerly into harnessing position when he stepped toward them. His great hands grabbed the tail of each and pulled. They tensed, but stood unmoved.

Besides his long stories and songs and asides, up a little side canyon Tubby kept a secret for us all. He got quiet and led me out the door and away through the trees to a hidden barn. Inside, he had kept oiled and polished ready for work an entire set of horse-drawn farm machinery. It was a museum in a barn that no one knew but the few he led there. He was historian for the primitive life. He was scholar with no degree or say-so but what he knew was crucial.

"They're all dead and I'm the only one that knows."

Farther west, just over the dunes from the Pacific, Marge Severy kept her home alone. The first time I stopped by, she had mushrooms spread fragrant on the kitchen table to dry—the Japanese pine mushroom that grows only on the slopes of Mount Fuji and on this coast, she said to me.

As one of the last of the local Siuslaw Indian people, she was the original character of the valley. We were the odd ones, the eccentric citizens of this landscape—with our motorized processions and neon fantasies strung out along Highway 101. When a low fog hung over the river and fir trees bowed down with rain, when old swans called from the south dunes and cormorants came winging low over town, I saw her walking. She was a part of those proper customs by fog and bird song. She was with the place, and we were strangers to it. We might one day belong as she had always.

She sat on an overturned boat one Sunday afternoon, watching the university archeologist dig out bones and beads and slender shells, fragile as ash, from a grave at the heart of town. Someone, digging a sewer line, had found the grave. Now it was being removed and labeled for study. The man

worked in the shade of his pit, and Marge, the sun behind her, wore the halo light of the old and the quiet. There was coherence in the earth. The man with the trowel and screen laid a ruler in the grave and numbered everything he took away.

We met again at the Indian cemetery Marge cared for, across from her house up North Fork. I found her leaning on a hoe among the wooden markers and indistinct plots in the sand. Fog rolled down over a tremendous dune above us.

“Soon that will be here,” she said, gesturing toward the dune. “Pretty soon I won’t be watching over these old graves. That will be kind of a relief, you know, because then nobody can dig them up to study them, like they do to our people.”

Sometimes before first light, when I stand behind my house in the city to listen, those hermit names come easy to my mouth. I will be one of them. For I would live their code of poverty and imagination in a doorless patchwork house guarded by a ferocious goose. I would live by the miracles of the uninsured. I would walk only, I would speak for days only with the birds, I would sing, and tend my village with a hoe.

Maybe it’s jail by now for Gypsy Slim. Maybe it’s death.

Maybe it’s a campsite, somewhere in my life.