

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: A. B. GUTHRIE'S TRILOGY AND THE TURNER THESIS

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The West has always attracted the American. Historically the West provided an opportunity for individual success. Taking this thesis, Frederick Jackson Turner, an historian, presented a paper in 1893 outlining the results of the various American frontiers on the American character. Turner proposed that the United States is a product of successive frontiers from the eastern seaboard to the Pacific and back to the Great Plains. Because of these repetitive frontiers and the continued lure of free land and advancing settlements, Americans are uniquely independent, materialistic, practical, self-reliant, buoyant, acutely alert individuals. Incorporating the various frontiers and character traits outlined by Turner, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., a contemporary Western novelist, presents a trilogy of novels of the frontiers and their effects on the characters who challenge the West.

The Big Sky is set on the high plains and mountain ranges, frontiers of the mountain men whose adventurous spirit opened up the western lands. The second novel, The Way West, takes place on the wagon train trails from St. Louis to Oregon,

as settlers, intent on material success, free land, bounteous crops, cross the prairies to begin a new life. These Thousand Hills unfolds in the hills of Montana where a young dreamer hopes to set up a ranch on the last of the open lands left in the United States. In each of these novels Guthrie incorporates the strengths of the characters as they battle and conquer the vast sweep of the West.

A. B. GUTHRIE'S TRILOGY AND THE TURNER THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
THE FRONTIERS . . . . .	1
THE BIG SKY . . . . .	20
THE WAY WEST . . . . .	38
THESE THOUSAND HILLS . . . . .	53
THE LAST FRONTIER . . . . .	62
NOTES . . . . .	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	72

## THE FRONTIERS

Throughout history the fascination of the West has had an impact on American people, namely the influence of adventure and independence. The early colonists were dependent on Europe and the sea, but inroads were made into the interior of the continent. These interior areas stirred the imagination with their magnificent forests, abundant grasses, and unlimited game. From the time of the earliest Americans, the unsettled western regions created a desire to move, to seek the answers to the secrets the unknown held. With continued acquisition of lands--Louisiana, the Southwest, the Oregon territory--greater and greater numbers of Americans took to the roads--first the explorers, the trappers, and the traders--paving the way for agricultural expansion.

Following Horace Greeley's advice to, Go West, Young Man, millions of people set out to seek their fortunes. When compared to other countries, the settling of the United States was unique. Rather than settlers initially spreading out across the land areas to make their homes as in the old countries (in most of which the settlement occurred in smaller areas and expansion was the result of conquest of neighboring peoples) the inhabiting of the American continent occurred in stages, a succession of frontier lines. From colonial times to the end of the

19th century the frontiers marked a division between civilization and the wilderness. The first frontier ran the length of the Atlantic Coast. As settlement increased, hunters and farmers began to spread to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Later the Mississippi River signified the dividing line between civilized settlements and the wilds. Each time the frontier moved westward it resulted from the ever-increasing numbers of people--hunters, farmers, ranchers--seeking the unknown. Each frontier was a source for individual accomplishment and hope, adventure and success, independence and equality. Supposedly, in the West, a man intent on success, adventure, independence, equality, could find a chance at life. In an historical and literary sense, the West, idealistically, represents a fountain from which the answer to all man's dreams flow. Cooper, Whitman, Twain, among others, all wrote of the allure of the West and the magnificence of the land and its effect on men.

Historians and writers alike have hit upon the unique nature of Americans and their environment. These dreamers have thus made an impact on the history of the United States. Thomas Jefferson, to name only one historical figure, was a man of vision who saw the possibilities of the western lands. Jefferson, during his presidency, sanctioned the Meriwether Lewis-William Clark expedition to the northwest, opening up roads to the West, one of which

later became the Oregon Trail. Writers such as Thoreau and Whitman praised the American wilderness. Thoreau believed that nature provides a spiritual reality. He spent his life seeking the simplicity of the forests and the essentials of life, deriding the evils of civilization. After spending time in the seclusion of Walden Pond, he learned "that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."<sup>1</sup> Such must be the attitude carried westward by the many settlers. They advanced in the direction of their dreams. Whitman also portrayed the land as a poem itself in his preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass:

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind

to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. . . . One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.<sup>2</sup>

The land is a force not to be ignored. Its allure, its vastness, its promise beckon. The land is one of the most vital influences on the American. As a basis for study, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis relating the significance of the various American frontiers of the West will be tied to the characters and events of a trilogy of works by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. This study will trace the influence of the West, the vast vacant continent, and its impact on the trilogy of historical novels by Guthrie, one of the foremost contemporary American authors of the West.

"No interpretation of American history," according to Howard L. Hurwitz, "has been so pervasive as Turner's frontier theory. It has colored all our thinking about the growth of the American nation. . . . the frontier must be given great weight if we are to look with any understanding into our nation's development."<sup>3</sup> Therefore,

in considering the significance of the frontiers in American thought, one must first turn to the nineteenth century historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, who taps the American West and its frontiers when he advances an hypothesis about the American character entitled, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In 1893 Turner presented his paper to the American Historical Association. It has been said, "This American environment which bent man and society to its mold captivated Turner's imagination and provoked his scholarly interest."<sup>4</sup>

American character possesses many traits which, according to Turner, are the direct result of the frontier experience in American history. Turner's central contention is based on the force of expansion and its effects. He says, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recessions, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."<sup>5</sup> Turner adds that the history of America is actually "the history of the colonization of the Great West." The frontiers of the West instigated vital forces in shaping American character to meet the changing conditions thrust upon them by the mixing of a complex civilized background and a primitive environment.<sup>6</sup>

As a foundation for this characterization of the westerner under the influence of the land, Turner proposes that American settlement is unprecedented, distinguishing

America from other countries and peoples. Turner's historical paper nurtures the theory that American society is not solely an extension of its European background, but is rather a unique character based on the ever-present influence of frontiers which sparked westward movement. Turner advances the theory that the frontier is the most important factor setting Americans apart from other peoples. Turner further proposes that the result of the frontier influence in America is a people infused with a spirit of freedom, individualism, nationalism, and primitive strength.<sup>7</sup>

Turner, in his historical presentation in 1893, expressed his belief that the intellectual traits found in Americans are caused by the existence of those frontiers. The common traits outlined by Turner resemble to a great extent the American notion of the character of the settlers of frontier days which still stir the imagination. Turner outlined the American character as

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant

individualism working for good and for evil,  
and withal that buoyancy and exuberance  
which comes with freedom--these are traits  
of the frontier, or traits called out else-  
where because of the existence of the frontier.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the American character of independence,  
freedom, individualism might be attributed to the presence  
of the frontier as Turner proposes. Turner felt that  
to study the really American part of our history one  
must look at the successive frontiers in terms of their  
political, economic and social results. He then traces  
the stages of the advancing frontiers from the Atlantic  
seaboard, up the rivers, across the Alleghenies, as decade  
by decade they extended to the West. A consequence of the  
westward movement was the development of settlements  
cut off from the seaboard regions. New areas were in-  
habited step by step from one natural boundary to the  
next. As more and more settlers headed West, there  
developed less and less dependence on England and a greater  
demand on the individual, creating a spirit of independence.  
As settlements arose the isolation, caused by intervening  
geographic barriers such as mountain ranges, resulted in  
the creation of federal changes. The new frontiers pre-  
cipitated national legislative measures. The national  
government, in dealing with the frontiers, found it  
necessary to effect legislation concerning internal

improvements (particularly the railroad), protective tariffs, and public domain in order to control the American interest in the expanded areas of the continent.

The frontier brought about other changes as well as legislation, according to Turner. In character, the frontiers resembled the Middle Region of the Eastern seaboard in that immigrants were a fusion of many nationalities (contrary to the South, supported by a baronial life style and New England, influenced by Puritanism). Consequently, the frontiers possessed a mixture of nationalities, economic patterns and religious beliefs. The result was a "process of cross-fertilization of ideas and institutions."<sup>9</sup> With the combined backgrounds of the settlers, the frontier economy and social character worked against sectionalism and toward national tendencies. The mobility of the frontier population also served as a death-knell to localism.

The consequence of the multi-cultural make-up of the frontier is the growth of democracy, the most important effect of the frontier in Turner's opinion. He says the frontier produced men of an individualistic nature who are basically anti-social, due to their primitive surroundings. The settlers especially resented direct control of their lives. They wanted a say as to what was to become of them. The lure of free land provided for them an "opportunity for competency" and then economic and political power.<sup>10</sup> (Even

though the wilderness provided the same opportunities for all men, Turner felt the one weakness in the growth of democracy on the frontier lay in the rise of the spoils system and related evils, such as inflated currency and lax business honor.) At times, there were moves to check the westward expansion since many feared a weakening of the whole country by the emigration of so much of the population, but the independent spirit of the settlers could not be held in check.

Since, as Turner professes, the frontier has had such an influence on the American character, an examination of the nature of the frontier itself may lend some insight. In each instance, the frontier was a wild, savage, untamed region. Because it was unsettled, the frontier took on the character of a primal setting, much in the manner of an untouched forest. Each new frontier went through the process of wilderness, partial settlement, civilization. Turner interprets the settling of the frontiers as a repetitive process in development of the people as well as the land. The existence of frontiers resulted in a "recurrence of the process of evolution" as Americans "return to primitive conditions" to develop each new area of land, according to Turner.<sup>11</sup> Thus, with each new frontier, American development began again. Whether it is the Appalachian fall line, the Mississippi, the Rockies, or the Great Plains, the

frontier represents a meeting point of primitivism and civilization. And as Americans emigrated to the new frontier, they came under the influence, the strength, and the savagery of the land, finally making out of it a home. As Turner describes the process, "At the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings, and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness. . . ." <sup>12</sup> Then the process begins again for the mountain man, the settler, the rancher, each resulting in a new product, American in nature. With the civilization of each successive frontier, Americans experienced "a perennial rebirth," "fluidity of life," "new opportunities," and "a continuous touch with simplicity," according to Turner. <sup>13</sup>

Each new frontier possessed similarities with those that preceded it, but each frontier was also unique. Settlers were all influenced by the shock of coping with primitive conditions. Each frontier precipitated a need to deal with Indian problems, the issue of public domain, the institution of connections with older settlements, and development of political, religious, and educational organizations. Each frontier served as a guide for the next as these issues cropped up. The differences in frontiers were based mainly on

location and time. (The mining frontiers of California or Colorado did not always have to cope with the exact same problems as the agrarian frontiers.) Turner points out that a study of frontiers would lead an historian to find the "record of social evolution" in the United States."<sup>14</sup>

"Historical understanding and national mythology have been generously enriched by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis,"<sup>15</sup> and a clearer understanding of the dreams and beliefs of Americans is the result of Turner's articulation of the influence of the frontiers. The American desire to find new frontiers has been reinforced by a number of classifications of American myths or beliefs. One such myth influential in American culture is the myth of the garden. In the garden myth the American attitude toward success finds its seeds. The American is perpetually looking for something better--health, home, job, reputation. The West provided such a possibility. Unsettled, new cheap land lured settlers to the Promised Land. Out West a new start was possible. Henry Nash Smith states that Turner's main idea "developed out of the myth of the garden with its insistence on the importance of the West, its affirmation of democracy, and its doctrine of geographical determinism."<sup>16</sup> Turner's thesis is the American conception of the history of the country, according to Smith.

An American myth which supports the view of the frontier

as a forest setting is the myth of the forest, a setting "primal, unspoiled, and generative."<sup>17</sup> In the forests (frontiers), man can find a new beginning, a new spirit, a new start. There he can return to the basic elements of life and test his courage and initiative. From the forests comes strength to settle the new lands. It is a primitive strength, to use Turner's phrase. In a sense, Turner is portraying the myth of the forest where, as William Coleman later describes it, tall trees "induce a 'forest change' in the settler who chose to penetrate the wild and 'shaggy continent.'"<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the myth of plenty and strength to be found in the West, the people who settled the frontiers are also a basis of myth. The pioneers, the mountain men, the cowboys are viewed in modern times as romantic characters indelibly stamped by adventure and individualism. Those who headed west are seen as men of character who are seeking something missing in the civilized regions from which they sprang. Their independence carried them into regions where their practicality was set to work.

One particular type of frontiersman around which American myth is built is the mountain man, a man who is isolated, self-sufficient, free, unconstrained by society. He acquires virtue through the hardships he encounters and conquers. A mountain man, related to the early

explorers, is seen as romantic in dress and in deed. He uses the tools and materials of the primitive areas in which he lives and is able to withstand tremendous hardship yet come out a winner because of his ingenuity and skill. Spurred by the spirit of adventure and intellectual curiosity, the mountain men pave the way for the trading posts and settlements which follow them. As a result, the early explorers are now, in a sense, idols of the nostalgic present. They have become a part of the fabric of our American heritage. These adventures and their participants have made their way into American life and literature, and the resultant myths persist in written form, echoed in the ideas and attitudes of Americans, past and future. The literary themes of natural nobility and physical adventure provide a source of explanation for the type of people of the American nation.

A. B. Guthrie, Jr., the contemporary novelist, utilizes the theme of the noble American frontiersmen. He has been described as an historically accurate novelist and a perceptive interpreter of the drama of the frontier experience. His books portray authentic accounts of the lives of men in their frontier eras. Guthrie himself says,

You regard your characters with compassion-- not uncritically, either, mind you. You understand them. You know what makes them tick. . . .

You present [characters] as human beings, maybe cruel, maybe evil, maybe grasping, but always human and credible, always against the background or always with the pinch of grace that gives them the third and necessary dimension.<sup>19</sup>

In support of Guthrie's capabilities as an author of the West who captures a realistic emotional impact from the land, Jackson K. Putnam says,

The novelist is well qualified to deal with such feelings, especially since he can confront the same environment as that faced by the historical actors and draw upon his emotional reaction to it in constructing his narrative. Consequently, the forces of nature in Western novels tend to play a dominant role in the narrative of events, frequently overshadowing the characters or taking on the attributes of an independent character in the story itself.<sup>20</sup>

Guthrie grew up in Montana which he came to know and love. His fiction is based in the regions with which he is familiar. Guthrie's imagination seems to be of the frontier era as well. Donald C. Stewart has said the land "endures beyond anything man can do to it.

Its immensity, its scope, and the sense of freedom and exhilaration it gives to all the generations of men who come upon it lift them out of themselves."<sup>21</sup> Such is the ability of Guthrie in his writing. He is able to combine the land and the characters in memorable and adventure-packed but realistic tales. Guthrie described the allure of the West by saying, "The greatest value in the West, if not the first reason for our fascination with its history, actual and exaggerated, is the specialty of space. Though the great open spaces is a term turned cosmic, its appeal abides. . . . man still hankers for room for himself." Guthrie's fascination with the West is summed up in his statement, "The West is our youth, the youth of our nation and, by translation, the youth of us all."<sup>22</sup> Turner also articulated this attitude of the American. He said the "expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."<sup>23</sup> Turner, as does Guthrie, attributes the American spirit to the effects of the land.

For further endorsement of Guthrie's writing, in an article entitled "A. B. Guthrie: A Bibliography," Richard Etulain has described Guthrie's ability to create fiction based on history. A. B. Guthrie "has built his fictional edifices from the lumber of human experience. This judicious juxtaposition of history and imagination is sufficient

reason to rank him among the first-rate historical novelists."<sup>24</sup>

In relating the country and its history with the character of its people, Guthrie says,

Space breeds its own type of man. . . . The true Westerner is not necessarily better or worse than the product of congestion, but he is very likely to be different. He is commonly freer and friendlier. He hasn't learned to be suspicious. He appraises a man for his worth, not his wealth and for sure not his ancestry. Weather and work and the demands on himself alone have shaped him, and chance has taught him to take fortune as it unfolds. Ordinarily he has a stout sense of humor. He can dismiss an adversity with a shrug or a wisecrack. Perhaps above all, he is democratic. In him lingers the old liberalizing effect of free land.<sup>25</sup>

Guthrie, like Turner, sees the American as a product of the land. Guthrie interprets for the reader the character of the westerner influenced by his environment. He is able to capture the emotional character as well as the factual substance.

The three types of frontiers Turner described in

his thesis are the Indian trader's frontier, the rancher's frontier, and the farmer's frontier. The Indian trader's frontier ran parallel to American discovery. Since Columbus, Turner says, the effects of the trader's frontier have been the exploration of new regions, the opening up of new river courses, and the delegation of power, by issuing guns, for example, to those natives who deal with the traders. The traders pioneered the way for civilization by utilizing the buffalo trails which became Indian trails, which then became roads, turn-pikes, and railroads. The trader set up trading posts on sites of Indian villages. These posts later became cities situated in natural locations commanding water systems. Because the Indians possessed traded weapons to resist the advance of settlement, the frontier of the trader actually functioned as a consolidating agent in history because a united effort was needed to throw off the Indian threat. The Army posts provided an initial wedge into Indian territory also. Later the rancher's frontier saw the utilization of a product--cattle--that was transportable from the interior regions. The farmer's frontier moved more erratically along river valleys and passes, influenced by Army posts, salt springs, and free land. Once new sources of salt were found, settlers were no longer tied to previous supplies to the east. New salt

locations enabled settlers to cross mountains, and the result was more independence. For the farmer the most continuous attraction of the frontier was the soil. Because of larger families needing more land to survive, and because of depleted soil, the farmer advanced to the beckoning cheap lands.<sup>26</sup>

A. B. Guthrie, Jr., portrays Americans on these three frontiers in his trilogy of Western novels. The trader's frontier is the setting for The Big Sky, the earliest of the three. Guthrie treats the life of the mountain man, Boone Caudill, in this novel. Boone explores the wilderness, trapping, trading, and living with the Indians. In the short period of years from 1830 to 1843, the trader's frontier, illustrated in The Big Sky, matures and then vanishes with the settlers' advance. Guthrie's novel The Way West portrays the farmer's frontier with a group of people setting out on an Oregon-bound wagon train to seek new farms in the Northwest where they have heard life is much more abundant. Coping with hardships of the trail, they make their way across the plains and mountain ranges to set homesteads where the soil is rich and the land is plentiful and cheap. The third novel, These Thousand Hills, is set on the rancher's frontier, the vast Montana plains of the 1880's. Lat Evans finds his way to the high plains to

found a ranch in the last unsettled area of the continent. In each novel, the characters are beset by similar problems and resort to their ingenuity to conquer them. The Indian threat, the encroachment of civilization, the primitive living conditions require that the characters deal with day-to-day needs which arise.

Guthrie's characters in these three novels are tied by certain shared traits which according to Gilbert D. Coon portray what the author's conception of the American character is. These traits, Coon says, are "restlessness, reticence, and loneliness."<sup>27</sup> A study of Guthrie's novels reveals men and women, possessing these common characteristics, under the influence of their relationships with the frontier. All are drawn to the West for their individual needs. They search for freedom; they possess the spirit of individualism and nationalism; they teem with primitive strength. Above all, they are deeply affected by their environment--the frontier--its hazards, its beauties, its strengths, its promises. A. B. Guthrie's characters possess the qualities described by Turner. They all possess strength, alertness, practicality, and are able to grasp the need for material things and the need for democracy, yet they possess a buoyancy for life.

## THE BIG SKY

The first of Guthrie's novels, The Big Sky, opens in the wooded backhills of Kentucky. Boone Caudill, whose father beats him, determines to run away and make a new life for himself out West because his Uncle Zeb, a mountain man, has told him stories of life on the frontier. While his father lies in a drunken stupor, Boone sets out, taking back roads and trails in hopes of avoiding anyone who might question him. After teaming up with a fellow traveler, Jim Deakins, Boone suffers a narrow escape with the law but manages to outwit the sheriff and light out for St. Louis. There he again gets in a scrape with the law when his father spots him, but Boone is able to give them the brush by diving into the Mississippi.

Later Boone again finds Deakins, and they prepare to join a boat crew heading for Blackfoot territory, an unsettled region deep on the Platte River. Scouting for the boat crew is Dick Summers, a seasoned mountain man whom Boone quickly learns to admire. Struggling upriver, Boone watches and learns from Summers as the older man scans the horizons for trouble and alertly awaits any possible attacks.

On board the boat is a young Indian maiden, Teal Eye, who intrigues Boone. The boat captain plans to exchange her with her native tribe in return for

trading rights. As time progresses, minor Indian encounters are turned away by the crew with the aid of Summers. However, the boat is later attacked by a savage force, and the crew is massacred except for Summers, Boone, and Deakins. Teal Eye escapes with the Indians.

The three survivors then team up and decide to open up a trapping business in the Indian territory. With the sage advice of Summers, Boone and Deakins manage to survive the bitter winter and stockpile some furs for trading. Boone realizes

A man took chances, hunting small;  
Indians might happen on him any day. If he  
kept his scalp, though, he got plews. And  
the risk wasn't so great with Summers along--  
not with a man along who could tell from the  
eye and ear of a horse or the set of a buffalo  
whether there was aught about.<sup>28</sup>

As years pass and all the trappers gather to sell their furs, the common complaint is that times are changing and the way of life of the mountain man is quickly disappearing. Beaver are scarce and prices are low. Summers therefore decides to retire to his farm in Missouri leaving Boone and Deakins on their own for another season.

After seven years on the frontier Boone, who has

never been able to forget the silent Teal Eye, decides to find the Indian maiden. He and Deakins set out deeper into the Platte regions, in hopes of finding her tribe. They eventually do locate the lodges of her people, but the tribe has suffered an epidemic of smallpox. Finally, - Boone finds Teal Eye safe from disease and determines to marry her and make his home among the Indians, now feeling that his home in Kentucky is completely unacceptable.

Times worsen for the tribe; furs are scarce; settlers are swarming across the plains. A speculator, Elisha Peabody, seeks out Boone asking for his aid in plotting a route through the mountains for the western-bound wagon trains. Because the trapping is so poor and Boone needs the money, he consents to lead the explorers even though by doing so he can foresee the end of his way of life.

As the novel closes, Boone's manner of living has indeed changed. His wife and friend Deakins are dead by his hands; the beaver are gone; there is nowhere for him to turn. Therefore, Boone returns to his Kentucky home once more to see his beloved mother and visit the retired mountain man Dick Summers. But Boone is a lost soul; there is nowhere for him. Civilization has destroyed his reason for living.

The impact of the garden myth and the history of the westward movement provide some insights into the characters in this Guthrie novel. As The Big Sky opens, Boone Caudill, a youth reared in the Kentucky backwoods, lights out for the West, forced from his childhood environment by a vicious father and drawn to the romantic regions described in stories told him earlier by his Uncle Zeb, a mountain man. Following a beating from his father, Boone runs away to freedom somewhere to the West: "Such a weakness came on him that he thought, for a little, he couldn't make himself go on. It was Pap that stiffened him, the thought of Pap mad as any bull, and of the unfair lick he'd hit and of the whoppings he had given before just for the fun he got." (p. 13)

(One might compare Boone's situation to another character in American literature, Huckleberry Finn. Because of rough treatment from Pap, Huck also lights out to find freedom and adventure on the Mississippi. And at the conclusion of Twain's novel, Huck also sets out for the frontiers of the West.) Boone hurries along, meeting up shortly with Jim Deakins, who is also free to be swept up in the allure of the West.

For Boone, Jim, and Dick Summers, the mountain man with whom they join up, the West is indeed a garden. They are free. Boone is free from his harsh father who

seeks to drag him back home. He is free from people being piled on top of each other like anthills, free in a "country a man could get his breath in." (p. 20) As time goes by, Boone becomes obsessed with avoiding towns and people. He feels caged in among them. For other mountain men such as Dick Summers, the West is also a place of freedom from restraints of civilization. Summers "lived like a wild thing, to eat and frolic and keep his scalp, not thinking from one day to another, not putting by against the future." (p. 110) Unfortunately for the way of life of the mountain men, others are also desirous of the garden-like life style of the West. Summers says of the westward movers, "They got a hunger, they have." (p. 363) As more and more settlers seek the garden, the early frontiersmen unwillingly make way for the onslaught.

The primitive lands of the Indian territory give rise to numerous dangerous situations for the mountain men. Young Boone's life is endangered time and time again as he and his companions travel deeper and deeper into Indian territory. They watch the shores of the Missouri and Platte rivers by the hour, searching for signs of attacking Indians. Eventually, the company is attacked by Sioux and all but wiped out by a band of renegades. "Boone couldn't see the bodies for the Indians [on the boat]. The men were all dead, though, dead and being

shot up and cut to pieces with the tomahawks he saw raised." (p. 155) Boone, wounded, escapes and later finds the only other survivors of the massacre.

But Boone exemplifies the man who fits himself into the primitive surroundings of the frontier. As the hunter and trapper who break through the wilderness, he gathers strength from the wilds and is, in a sense, recreated as a savage, an enduring American character type around which some American mythology centers. The forerunner of the civilized man who turns to savagery and thus innocence is James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking. Cooper paved the way in literature with the tales of the Leatherstocking, a fictional counterpart of the frontiersman and mountain man (later the cowboy) who seek adventure and elbow room, who personify the wilderness as all that is good--innocence, strength, virtue, harmony--as opposed to the evils of civilization. (The noble savage continues to find a place in modern pulp fiction. The benevolent hunter is portrayed as a man younger than Leatherstocking, but his prowess in marksmanship and fighting is unequalled. The Wild West fictional accounts also support the myth of the natural supremacy of the frontier where man finds truth, strength, and virtue.) The frontiersman, in his savage innocence, relies on his cunning to survive the hardships and dangers, as in the case with Boone Caudill. However, due

to circumstances beyond his control, Boone is reduced to an object of pity.

Boone does retreat to savagery. He is reduced to eating raw meat to survive when he is stranded in a blizzard. He prefers the primitive life style of the Indians to the insanity of the white settlements, even those so remote as the outlying forts along the Platte and Teton Rivers. Truly Boone does develop a strength from his surroundings. He is an admirable character in that respect. He seems at one with the country: "Standing still, looking west beyond the river, a man might have thought the country was saying something to him." (p. 72) Boone feels he is a part of the country he comes to love: "Looking out over it, Boone felt he was everywhere on it, like the air or the light." (p. 121)

Because the frontiers are so open and wide, it is natural that they stir the imagination of the frontiersmen. Boone

could see forever and ever, nearly any way he looked. It was open country, bald and open, without an end. It spread away flat now and then rolling, going on clear to the sky. A man wouldn't think the whole world was so much. It made the heart come up. It made a man little and still big, like a king looking out. It occurred to Boone that this was the

way a bird must feel, free and loose, with the world to choose from. (p. 103)

Everything about the vastness of the lands causes the inhabitants to gather strength from the environment. Boone again feels dazed by the land and its reaches: "It was an enormous world, a world of heights and depths and distances that numbed the imagination . . . everything had been made to giant's measure." (p. 270) No wonder the frontiersmen gathered strength from the land.

In the novel The Big Sky Guthrie draws the characters with the traits mentioned by Turner in his frontier thesis. The mountain men are strong; they are acutely aware of their surroundings. Those newcomers to the frontiers are possessed of practicality and materialism. And to set them apart, they exude a nervous energy and buoyancy for life in the new lands.

In a sense, going out West creates a new breed of man. Summers once deliberates about the strength a man gets from the land: "It was all in the way a man thought, though, the way a young man thought. When the blood was strong and the heat high a body felt the earth was newborn like himself. . . ." (p. 183) And of course, the influx of settlers creates more and more confidence in the gains to be made in the West. A speculator comments about the growing nation and the opportunities the early

settlers are able to take advantage of:

We are growing. The nation is pushing out. New opportunities are sure to arise, bigger opportunities than ever existed in the fur trade. Transport, merchandising, agriculture, lumbering, fisheries, land. I can't imagine them all. . . . I'm goin' for soil rich as gold and crops the like of which you never see, and weather that suits a man come winter or summer, and no fevers to shake the bones loose. (p. 183)

For the person who has the vision and the confidence, the West was certainly a place of bounty, a garden.

The mountain men in The Big Sky are strong men willing to give what is necessary in order to survive; "Boone was a true man, regardless, cool and ready when there was danger about. He didn't know what it was to be affrighted. And you could depend on him, no matter what." (p. 206) Boone does what is necessary: "What he could see and hear and feel and eat, and kill or be killed by, that was what counted." (p. 205) He is a man whose "strength and forwardness and primitive masculinity . . . dwarfed any disciplined powers." (p. 217)

As Turner described them, frontiersmen of America are also men of acuteness and inquisitiveness in their

activities. The mountain men in Guthrie's novel possess these traits as well. Dick Summers is acutely aware of every movement and sound, mainly because his life and the lives of those around him depend upon his alertness: "there would be a sound somewhere or a movement, and you would see that he [Summers] was alive and quick all the time, quicker and more alive than anybody, as if his senses told him things even in his sleep." (p. 164)

The frontiersman's inquisitiveness also runs to the philosophical. Jim Deakins listens to the wind blowing across the hills and wonders where it comes from and where it is bound: "Was it still tearing on east of them rolling the dead grass of last year, bending the trees and whining? Did it leave an emptiness where it came from?" (p. 74)

Summers also muses about his life of freedom and the changing times as his thoughts trace his past and the memories of trapping and rendezvous, but

as a man got older he felt different about things in other ways. He liked rendezvous still and to see the hills and travel the streams and all, but half the pleasure was in the remembering mind. A place didn't stand alone after a man had been there once. It stood along with the times he had had, with the thoughts he had thought, with the

men he had played and fought and drunk with, so when he got there again he was always asking whatever became of so-and-so, asking if the others minded a certain time. It stood with the young him and the former feelings. A river wasn't the same once a man had camped by it. The tree he saw again wasn't the same tree if he had only so much as pissed against it. There was the first time and the place alone, and afterwards there was the place and the time and the man he used to be, all mixed up, one with the other. (pp. 184-185)

Material success is one of the prime reasons settlers headed west. Again the idea of the garden, a place of plenty, influences the reasoning of the westward movers. Peabody, who hopes to open new routes to the west with the assistance of Caudill, envisions what the future holds for the area in terms of material wealth:

Looking into the future, one could see pack trains climbing it [the pass], and carts and four-wheeled wagons piled with settlers' goods, bound for the fertile valleys of the Columbia. They would be free men, these, without a slave among

them--free men going to free country to establish what would come to be free states of the Union, once the claims of the British had been dismissed. Afterward the lanes of commerce would open, replacing the long, slow sea route around the Horn. He could see cargoes going up and down the Missouri and the Columbia and being transshipped across the mountains over the very ground his horse trod--cargoes of processed goods and imports, of textiles, tools, rifles, coffee, tea, and sugar, flowing west in exchange for the products the settlers had wrested from the new land. There would be stores to establish and transportation lines to build and operate and land to be dealt in. Once one was familiar with the country he would know where to direct his energies. Boston men would be told of the pass, and Boston men would be acquainted with the possibilities, and Boston money, hitherto so cautious, would answer to the assurance of tidy earnings. (pp. 272-273)

A belief related to the myth of the garden is portrayed in Peabody's dreams. The myth of the roads

encompasses the belief that one can find wealth of a financial nature as well as of a personal nature. In the West where cheap lands are for the taking and where isolation from populated areas provides a chance for development, a man can indeed become rich. The frontier offers the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the dream of financial success. Turner explained it as an opportunity: "Each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons. . . ." <sup>29</sup> Other Big Sky characters envision the opportunities, the pot at the end of the rainbow. The river men want to make great sums of money by trading with the Blackfeet. The captain of the craft has a dream of becoming very rich and showing the rest of the world what a success he is. So he takes a chance, "a gambler's chance, to make very many dollars, and he would manage. He would push ahead." (pp. 88-89) His adventure is mainly for material gains.

On numerous occasions, the mountain men must turn their minds to practical ways of handling situations on the frontier, whether they be legal means or not. As the boat travels upriver carrying liquor to set up a trading post with the Indians, the river men must devise a

way of avoiding the authorities at the fort who might confiscate the trade goods. Sneaking past Leavenworth in the night, Summers cups his hands over his mouth and gives "the howl, starting low and rising--the wild lonely cry of a wolf, challenging the dog and the night" (p. 77) in order to delude the occupants of the fort. The men aboard the boat continually try to avoid letting the authorities know exactly what they have in mind so as to avoid competition or complete disruption of their plans for trading.

Another frontiersman is also involved in learning practical means of getting ahead in Guthrie's book. Peabody, who comes to find accessible routes to the west, encounters Dick Summers and Boone Caudill in hopes of gaining their support. Peabody is not interested in encroaching in the traders' market, "I'm not interested in beaver. . . . It is development I'm interested in, future development." (p. 273) He is looking to the future and hoping to be in on the ground floor. He wants to learn where each mountain pass is located and what the best route to the west is so he can take advantage of that knowledge when the people start coming.

Turner described the frontiersmen as men of "restless nervous energy." They had to be on the move, going somewhere, doing something. Boone Caudill is such

a character. He aches to be after something just over the next rise: "Boone heard the cry of some animal, thin and quavering and lonesome. A little shudder shook him, traveling up his back and tingling the hair on his neck. This made living worth a man's time. This and buffalo ahead, ready to be shot." (p. 95) Boone also looks forward to the gathering of the fur trappers, a yearly event. He perseveres through the frigid winter months, restlessly awaiting the time all the trappers rendezvous to sell their pelts and socialize in a backwoods manner. Boone contemplates the next gathering: "That's what I'm living for, is rendezvous. Whiskey and playin' hand, and the Injin girls all purtied up. . . ." (p. 161)

Just as Turner professed, the land creates the character of the inhabitants. Dick Summers likes his life style; he wouldn't want anything else. He says,

"I didn't shine, clerkin', makin' figures and givin' out beads and vermilion and powder and takin' in plews and robes and packin' 'em while all the time a man could be outside, free as air, trappin' beaver and eatin' fleece fat and makin' camp when you wanted to and goin' on when you were a mind to, with none to hinder." (p. 83)

Perhaps the satisfaction for the frontiersmen

comes from the fact that they are such individuals, self-reliant. The characters created by Guthrie are men who enjoy the challenge of the wilderness. They are men who depend on themselves, individuals who do not have to rely on others to survive. They are not apt to buckle under to the wants of others, but are free of the control civilization brings. Boone enjoys his way of life and the fact that he can determine his own needs. Trapping, the land, the aloneness, all suit him. He spends a long time along the streams and in the hills and is satisfied with that way of life.

#### Freedom

was better than being walled in by a house,  
better than breathing in spoiled air and feeling  
caged like a varmint, better than running  
after the law or having the law running after  
you and looking to rules all the time until  
you wondered could you even take down your pants  
without somebody's say-so. Here a man lived  
natural. (p. 191)

The character of Guthrie's frontiersmen can be summed up in Turner's phrase "a buoyancy and exuberance with freedom." Each of the men who break new ground finds the experience one to lift the spirit. Dick Summers sees the land as "wild and purty, like a virgin woman.

Whatever a man does he feels like he's the first one done it." (p. 65) And his life style suits him. "All the time livin' wonderful, loose and free's ary animal. That's some, that is. . . . A man gets a taste for it." (p. 66)

Boone Caudill observes the spirit of nationalism in the settlers who begin to invade the open plains of his beloved wilderness. Their determination to lay claim to the Northwest is summed up by a farmer:

"It's our country, by God! It's good old Americky, clean to fifty-four forty, or will be, anyway." (p. 363)

Peabody, the speculator, also sees the annexation of the Northwest as a definite possibility:

"Nothing shall stop us. British? Spanish? Mexicans? None of them. By every reasonable standard the land is ours--by geography, contiguity, natural expansion. Why, it's destiny, that's what it is--inevitable destiny." (pp. 264-265)

But because of the advancing numbers of people, the mountain man faces the problem of civilization pushing him farther and farther until there is no place for him to go. Such is the case for Boone Caudill and his companion Dick Summers. All too soon their way of life is disappearing:

"There was beaver for us and free country and a big way of livin', and everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves and couldn't do different if we'd knowed. We went to get away and to enj'y ourselves free and easy, but folks was bound to foller and beaver to get scarce and Injuns to be killed or tamed, and all the time the country gettin' safer and better known. We ain't seen the end of it yet, Boone, not to what the mountain man does against hisself. Next thing is to hire out for guides and take parties acrost and sp'ile the country more."  
(p. 366)

And thus the trader's frontier comes to an end.

## THE WAY WEST

Drawing upon the romance of the wagon train era, Guthrie unfolds the story of Lije Evans who signs up bound for Oregon to make a new start on the frontiers of the Northwest. This second novel of the trilogy, The Way West, earned a Pulitzer Prize for Guthrie in 1950. Lije Evans, who farms some acreage in Missouri, finds himself ensnared by the visions of success and plenty which the train master describes. At the same time Lije is drawn west by something he cannot put in words. After listening to all the talk of the people already signed up to head west, Lije

wondered what he would do and still didn't wonder, either. It was as if the course had been set all along, and he had been playing that it wasn't, acting like he could say or no. . . . He wouldn't figure too much why it was he went. The head got tired, figuring. He would just go because he wanted to, for all sorts of reasons.<sup>30</sup>

So, selling his farm and packing what few possessions he can carry, Lije, his wife Becky, and their son Brownie find themselves among a group of travelers who are bound for Oregon for various reasons. Leading the group is

Dick Summers, the retired mountain man from the earlier novel of the trilogy, The Big Sky. Summers is freed from the obligations of civilization when his wife dies.

Lije is an easygoing but strong man who soon makes his presence felt among members of the train. The leadership is poor and discontent arises. Tadlock, the train leader, has pushed mercilessly for the wagon train to keep moving regardless of the aches and hardships felt by the company. Finally the members ban together and oust Tadlock. Lije, much to his dismay, finds himself appointed the new wagon master. He carries out his tasks with skill and understanding and gains the trust and admiration of the travelers, including Dick Summers, on whom Lije depends for advice. As he worries about his responsibilities

He was glad for Dick's friendship. He leaned on Dick. He was stronger inside because of him. Maybe that showed he wasn't fit for captain. Maybe a captain ought to be stout enough to stand alone, wanting no help from anyone except the help that would be expected of any pilot, like advice on crossings and routes and watch-outs for Indians. Well, that wasn't how he was cut. Never, anywhere, had he wanted to be boss. So he would lean on Dick, and when hard questions came up he would

call the council together. They would have solid ideas. But there would still be times, he realized uncomfortably, when he would have to act. A captain had to be more than a leaner and a caller of meetings. He had to give confidence to people, and encouragement. He had to see, one way or another, that the train kept together and kept going. He had to lead, no matter if he didn't want to, else the train would fail. He wished he had just his own family to watch out for. (p. 132)

Following many hardships--river crossings, snake bites, Indian attacks--Lije is able to bring the wagon train to its destination. In the meantime, he has gained self confidence and the admiration of a number of the wagon train members. His son has grown up considerably and marries one of the girls on the train. Seeing that Lije and the remaining party are going to be able to finish the trip, Dick Summers again says goodbye and sets off into the mountains for which he has never lost his attachment. Lije ponders why Summers must leave rather than join him and his family in Oregon:

What was it in the past that pulled him back, that put the lines of wanting in his face sometimes when he didn't know that anyone was looking? Trapping? Indians? Buffalo?

The wild and empty country? Evans could understand a love of them. He liked open land himself. But still a man must live ahead. . . .

"You'll tend to that, Lije. I kind of want to see the Popo Agie again," said Summers.

Evans didn't ask what or where the Popo Agie was, or why Dick wished to see it. It didn't matter now. What or where or why would be just words to go along with other words that, hearing, he couldn't quite make sense of. "See you in the mornin', anyhow," he told Dick as they walked back to camp.

"Sure thing."

He didn't though. Before he roused, before any others did, Dick had slipped away. (pp. 339-340)

The characters in Guthrie's second novel, The Way West, are also searching for the garden. They are confident of what they will find in Oregon--a new start. Again the new land is "a place where there's no fever . . . soil rich as anything. Plant a nail and it'll come up a spike. . . . Just set by and let the grass grow and the critters birth and get fat." (p. 9) In addition to material wealth, the Oregon bound settlers are confident they will find personal benefits. The settlers "wanted to make something out of [life], as if they could take it and

shape it to their way if only they worked and figured hard enough." (p. 51) Some want a fresh start for their families. Lije Evans thinks of his son Brownie as he contemplates the trip to the Northwest. "I'd like for him to know something besides root, hog, or die." (p. 28) In addition, a freshness in ambition is seen in settlers who want to make a name for themselves and see the frontier as a means of doing it. "A man didn't make history, staying close to home." (p. 13)

Lije Evans also seeks freedom and the garden of plenty. "It was just that he [Lije] wanted something more out of life than he had found . . . like thinking about getting out of old ways and free of old places." (p. 4) So after talking with several other Missouri farmers, Lije packs up his family and heads West over the Oregon Trail. He decides to "breach a fence and head for other pastures." (p. 53) He sells out his farm in Missouri and loads his belongings in a wagon and meets the trials of the trail to find the open spaces and unfettered life of the Oregon territory. He looks to new cheap lands, a new beginning, the Promised Land.

But each frontier has its dangers and the wagon train has its share. Dick Summers, the guide for the travelers, continually keeps an eye out for danger from Indians. One day as he scouts the surrounding regions, he comes upon an Indian village. "He reined

into the brush and found a game trail and followed it, wanting to make sure the village was Snake and not Bannock or maybe Crow or Blackfoot, who used to be far travelers." (p. 223) Several times, the veteran Indian scout saves the greenhorn travelers from becoming ensnarled in dangerous situations with the savage tribes along the trail. Once he rescues Brownie from Indians when the boy remains on the plains after the train pulls out to carve his initials on a rock. Danger from the elements is also an ever-present concern as the pioneers learn when water runs low and wagons must be lightened to cross the arid plains. In addition they meet with danger from the elements in the form of flooded rivers and venomous snakes. All in all, the members of the wagon train must grow to meet the challenges of the vast lands previously unknown to them.

Guthrie is a master at portraying the vastness of the frontier and its influence on the settlers. The wagon train approaches the Platte, and the travelers are both humbled and proud at the same time as they scan the scene which lay before them. "It wouldn't be easy. It wouldn't be what people called fun. Great was the name for it, the only name he could find in his mind." (pp. 88-89) The vastness of the primitive region leaves many in awe, and they will never be the same as a result of having been a participant. The

plains, ridges, the sky all are a "wild, strong sight, a rich and powerful sight that awed a man and lifted him inside" and cause the traveler to feel "greatness, smallness and greatness both among such wild riches." (p. 154)

The country leaves its mark. And in the end, the settlers conquer the land just as Turner described it, and just as Guthrie portrays it: "Each reach of trail had taken toll. . . And yet--and yet--the thing was worth the cost. No prize came easy. Free land still had its price. A chance at better living and somehow to be earned. A nation couldn't grow unless somebody dared. The price was high, but who would say it was too high . . . ? (p. 308)

In order to meet the challenge of the trail the wagon train members develop the strength of character necessary to conquer the land. Lije Evans is one of the characters Guthrie portrays as a strong but human man. He is a "big man with the easygoing manner . . . the signs of good humor in the broad and fleshy face, the indications of physical competence in the stout hands and big frame. . . . what a man should be who contemplated a long, hard, dangerous trip." (p. 14) A man who is strong in purpose and able to meet the hardships of the frontier is a necessity. And sometimes a strength in determination is superior to physical strength. Summers, the pilot, marvels at "these folks who are strong, strong in purpose even when weak in body." (p. 216)

Dick Summers finds his strength to meet the land as a man apart. His self reliance is a trait admired and envied by the tenderfoot wagon train members. Summers is hard to control because he does what he knows is necessary; he possesses a casual independence from others, not developing any strong ties with the other travelers. Tadlock envies Summers and his confidence. Tadlock feels Summers

contaminated the company with his casual independence, his backwoodsman's uncertain respect for authority. Summers knew the trail. He was a good guide, an expert hunter, a watchful scout, a never-sleeping sentinel. He was all of these, . . . but he was also a man hard to manage or impress, a man admired for his Indian graces and rude skills and so imitated in attitude. (p. 117)

Tadlock describes Summers as "independent as a hog on ice," (p. 118) and jealously wishes he possessed the same attributes.

Summers realizes that determination and strength are not just for the men who cross the land. He muses, "Raw or not, the women did their part and more. They traveled head to head with men, showing no more fear and asking no favor. . . . They had a kind of toughness in

them that you might not think, seeing them in a parlor."

(p. 297) Guthrie quietly but successfully builds the character of the women in his novels. Rebecca knew

they had to get to Oregon all right. She knew they had to travel, but she couldn't be so all-fired pleased, come night, that they were far gone from the morning. At night she felt tired and a little sad with tiredness and didn't like to think about tomorrow; and she got to wondering then if Oregon was what it was cracked up to be.

(pp. 140-141)

Even with the doubts and the troubles she stands beside Lije and finishes the journey. Realistically Guthrie portrays the strain of the lives of the women, partially through Rebecca's musings and physical difficulties. She knew, "It was the time of the month, . . . for she had been doing better lately in body and mind both, but now she felt she couldn't go on." (p. 141)

Guthrie's authentic depiction of the West includes his incorporation of a variety of characters on the train. McBee joins the train leaving behind debts and a poor reputation. He is a sullen, skulking man easily despised. Another weak character in the company is Mr.

Mack, whose marriage is suffering and who gets one of the young girls pregnant. He also endangers the train one night while on watch by indiscriminately shooting a harmless Indian. Guthrie throws together a diversity of characters, but the ones who are successful in their search for a better life are those who are willing to conquer the steepest hills, the widest rivers, and still have the strength for the unknown that lay before them.

Embodying alertness and willingness to adapt to everyday dangers and personal needs, the Oregon travelers are brought to life. As pilot for the wagon train, Summers is constantly watching the horizon to provide for the safety of the train. His "eyes were never quiet. They ran to right and left and looked ahead and back, and what they missed, Evans imagined, wasn't much." (p. 87)

Becky, Lije's wife, is alert to her husband and his worth, which she sees and hopes he will also recognize: "What he needed was a dare. What he needed was to find out what he amounted to." (p. 37) The frontier provides the opportunity for Lije to find his worth.

In The Way West some of the would-be settlers also demonstrate the practical turn of mind as outlined by Turner. These travelers know that the ones who get to Oregon first will have the advantage. They tell others, "First come, best served. Best land, best damsites, best business locations." (p. 9) They are concerned with

getting the train on the trail so that others will not cheat them out of the best of what awaits them.

Other characters display the nervous restlessness of the frontiersman. They are dissatisfied with present conditions and are ready to pick up and move on. Many of the travelers are looking to Oregon merely because it is a change, something different. One of the company says he is going "just to get where I ain't." (p. 20) Others merely enjoy the fact of doing something different, being active, taking pleasure from the energy they expend. Lije, as the wagons creep along the trail, enjoys the activity of his own chores and the action of the wagons themselves. Something is always going on to satisfy his restless spirit. He "takes such a real and simple pleasure in the work of his muscles and the roll of wheels." (p. 140)

The frontiersmen of the Oregon bound train exemplify the spirit of democracy, the result of the frontier in Turner's words. As they move across the plains, the members of the wagon train determine to employ democratic means of governing the routines of the trip. They elect a council, draw up guidelines, and hold conferences to determine the best means of governing the people and conquering the land. For example, the wagons trade places in the line day by day so that all of the emigrants share the dust of the trailing train. When one of the leaders becomes too overbearing, the group ousts him and elects another more democratic wagon master, Lije Evans.

One of the more humorous incidents in The Way West occurs when a democratic gathering meets to discuss the use of buffalo chips as a source of fuel. The men are opposed to their wives' having to handle such disgusting objects; however, buffalo chips are the only fuel on the plains. The discussion is uncomfortable for the men who impose their views of femininity on the women who must use the chips. The men's gathering concludes with the fellows deciding

"If He has left us nothing to cook with except buffalo dung, He means us to cook with buffalo dung."

"Us?"

"Those who cook regularly."

"Suits me," McBee said, forgetting Tadlock had silenced him.

"What is not offensive in His sight should not be so in ours."

The men were nodding again, even Byrd, feeling better since God had taken sides.

Holdridge spoke for the first time then. He had been at the edge of the crowd, listening and watching out of a face made black as a kettle by beard and weather. Higgins took him for a shy man, though he didn't look it. "Who's goin'

to pick the cow chips?" he asked.

"The younger ones can bring them in,"  
Tadlock told him.

Sure, Higgins thought, the little ones and the boys not quite grown up would pick the chips and the women would cook over them and the men would make out not to notice. All but the pups could keep their put-on. All this palaver was just a bow to manners. From the first they knew they'd have to vote for chips.

Returning to the wagons, Higgins heard Evans say to Summers, "Well?"

"Heap of doin's over a cow dab," Summers answered. (pp. 94-59)

The dominant characteristic explained by Turner which the frontiersman possesses is buoyancy, a lively approach to the freedoms encountered on the frontier. Lije Evans joins the wagon train for himself, for the experience, for the lift: "As much as for what they called patriotism, Lije was going west for the fun of it, as Summers was himself." (p. 53) The feeling the move to the frontier provides for all the characters of The Way West can be summed up as a feeling of giving meaning to life, whatever the surface mouthings:

It wasn't a thing for reason, this yondering,

but for the heart, where secrets lay deep and mixed. Money? Land? New chances? Patriotism? All together they weren't enough. In the beginning, that is, they weren't enough, but as a man went on it came to him how wide and wealthy was his country, and the pride he had talked about at first became so real he lost the words for it. (p. 154)

Indeed the feeling of nationalism is prevalent in the attitudes of the members of the wagon train. The train pushes forward to reach the Northwest in order to add strength to the United States' claim to the land. The emigrants want to see their future home as part of the country which they are leaving. As the train progresses, the travelers keep track of the situation in the British settlements in the new territory. They plan to push for Americanization of the area. And the pioneers are the ones who make the final decision whether the Northwest is British or American. "What's going to decide it? People, that's what. People like you and me if we've got gumption enough to settle there." (p. 12) And having been a part in the expansion of the nation will provide a source of pride for the new landowners. "It would be a proud thing . . . for you and your children and their young ones, too, saying Pa or Grandpa helped win the country. Or do you want to sit in a chair and let others

make history?" (p. 13) Finally with their determination and strength the members of the train arrive in the Northwest to begin anew, make history, put their practicality to work.

## THESE THOUSAND HILLS

The last and weakest of Guthrie's trilogy of novels, These Thousand Hills, focuses on Lat Evans, the grandson of the wagon train master in The Way West. Lat, whose family has settled in the once-fertile river valleys of Oregon, envisions a more prosperous future on the frontiers of Montana where he wants to found a ranch on the Tansy River. He dreams of herds of cattle and horses grazing on the hillsides and is determined to make his dreams become a reality.

Leaving his family behind in Oregon, Lat signs up to accompany a cattle drive from Oregon across the two hundred miles to the east. As the drive progresses, Lat learns more about cattle and the country, putting the knowledge by for the future. At the end of the trail, Lat takes advantage of an opportunity to acquire some horses by breaking a bronc as part of a bet. He later wins the affection of a prostitute who is willing to stake him for a race with the prize being more horses. During the winter, Lat and some friends trap to raise a stake. His partners are not driven by the same urge for land that Lat is but one of them, Carmichael, understands why Lat is so restless. Carmichael

had the answer. Fool around with reasons  
and you came to the right one and found the

words for it and felt satisfied, as with a story that had to be shaped and, sure enough, at last was. "A man with a purpose don't lack for a party," he said.<sup>31</sup>

By winning bets and taking advantage of opportunities which arise, Lat is able to begin making his ranch a reality. He buys some land, and then he and some hands round up stray cattle to stock the place. Feeding his animals hay during the winter, an unheard-of practice on the open range, Lat makes his work pay and his losses are negligible; thus he is able to become increasingly more able to see his dream come true.

Finding success in ranching, building up his reputation, Lat begins to think about his place in the community and a family. Having met the challenges of the frontier, Lat matures and becomes a man who has managed to get ahead through individual effort and determination; he marries the niece of the local minister and takes part in community activities. Lat's life does not run smoothly, but he is able to overcome the problems which arise without having to compromise himself or without forgetting his friends who have helped him become the success he is. Much as he appreciates what the young hooker has done for him, Lat could not bring himself to marry her; but when she runs into trouble with the law years later, Lat goes to her rescue even though he knows

it may damage his marriage and reputation.

Eventually the myth of the garden stretched to the last frontier, the Great Plains, commonly referred to as the Great American Desert. Land hungry pioneers moved into the unsettled regions, formerly considered uninhabitable, taking up the last of the open lands of the West. Lat Evans is characterized by Guthrie as one of those who follow a desire for the freedom of the open spaces, a chance at a new beginning. He leaves Oregon, where his family has settled, because he feels cramped. Lat takes off for new frontiers just as his grandfather Lije had done because of encroaching neighbors and the draw of new and fertile lands. Lat sees the crowding of the land in the Northwest where his grandfather led the family years before. People are too numerous:

"That was the trouble with all Oregon, here and elsewhere even more--too many people, too much stock, too many homestead claims, and so wildlife was disappearing and cows were poor in flesh and price, and streams ran tame and clouded." (p. 1) Lat's ambition is to find land in Montana and set up a ranch, free from the pressures and crowded conditions of farming in the Northwest. Once out in the open Montana expanse, Lat is questioned about his attitude toward the country:

"There's just distance, so much that

there's no place to go. Don't you ever feel crowded by distance?"

"Crowded. I feel free. . . . What's better?" says Lat. (p. 193)

Once he is in Montana, Lat is possessed of the freshness and confidence of the frontiersman. He is positive he will make a success of his life, a life for which his family will be proud. His dream coming true is to

own cattle, and by the thousands, and have range for them in the new land of Montana and men would come to him to ask advice, all brands and breeds of men, including some who wouldn't go to Pa; and Pa would smile a proud, small smile, since he hadn't done as well, and say, "We knew it from the first, son," and Ma would bake an apple pie, remembering how he had loved it before he fared so high, and Grandpa would break into a song. (p. 12)

As do all the settlers of the frontiers, Lat has confidence in what lies ahead; he is sure that it is something better, finer, fresher, than what he is leaving behind. He is sure that freedom from the restraints he is feeling in Oregon will be realized once he is out in Montana,

in the garden.

Nevertheless, success does not come at once for Lat. The land is too wild and he and his companions must fit themselves to meet the primitive life style and the dangers which are inherent in the wilds. Lat and his sidekick Tom Ping find themselves embroiled in one of many dangerous situations as they work to trap animals to earn money for a stake for the ranch:

A shake or two, Tom told himself, and he'd be through, thank God; but all at once he felt them at his back, felt them through the lifted bristles of his neck, and he came slow around, and there they were--a line of Indian bucks on foot with loosened shoulder wraps and hands free on their guns. (pp. 91-92)

The two men are taken prisoners by the band of renegades. Through sheer determination and strength of character, Lat decides to doctor one of the Indians who is wounded even though Lat knows if he fails he is signing his death warrant. Later Lat and Tom are set free when the chance he has taken pays off and the brave recovers. At other times Lat encounters danger from the snowstorms and from illegal activities. But the nature of the land is bound to produce dangers for the frontiersman. Lat endures and conquers.

Part of Lat's determination to conquer the land lies in the fact of its vastness and the effect it has on Lat. He feels a sense of strength and weakness in the presence of such vastness,

names and places and things no words could tell. Spring in Montana. Summer. Fall. The look of ranges, bench on bench. The month of the wild rose. The time that cactus flowered. Everywhere the grasses straight or blowing. Cows and calves, all the fat earth for a pasture. The chinook, out of its mother cloud over the mountains. The feel of winds. Winter, even, and the tonic-feel of cold. The sky. Always the sky. (p. 160)

And yet, Lat wins; he adapts and conquers the land. "Here was his land, he thought. Here he was the land's. Miles, mountains, sky, waters, grass--they freed and claimed him." (p. 266) He gains strength from the vast primitive Montana hills.

Naturally Lat has gone to Montana to make his fortune. He maintains a grasp on material benefits. He is willing to take a financial chance in order to advance his plan for a ranch. He enters a race with an Indian in hopes of winning a horse; he doctors brands to increase

his herd; he borrows money on a sure thing to have a stake for the place on the Tansy River; he enters a horse-breaking contest with two horses at stake in hopes of winning even more stock. All the time, Lat is intent on making a place for himself in Montana, financially and personally. With his eyes to the future Lat incorporates some foreign ranching techniques to Montana. He wants to feed hay all winter long and build fences to keep his stock from straying. If he is successful, he feels that it will benefit others in addition to himself. "A country didn't grow up alone. It grew up through men, who, if they were worthy, wanted to feel that something of themselves, some strength and hope and work and vision, went permanently to public benefit." (p. 203)

If Lat is successful, others will be successful, and all will come out ahead.

Lat has his eyes to the future. He envisions Montana and his ranch as a meaningful part of the States. He works to make his home one to be proud of; he sits on the school board and is involved in the functions of the town and church. He wants to make his town upstanding and a place worthy to call home:

A man saw the country growing up around him, saw settlers moving in, wild acres fenced, families coming into being; and he saw unsolved and multiplying problems, like the wretched,

immediate problem of the thefts of livestock, which had no right or lawful answer. There were others in plenty, more important ones. Education. Law. Law enforcement. Courts of justice. Progress toward statehood. There would be still others. The territory would continue to increase. . . . (p. 203)

Because so many head to the frontiers, it is natural that the many types of individuals would be thrown together. Yet among the frontiersmen there exists a tolerance, a democratic acceptance of others, their backgrounds and beliefs. Ram Butler, boss of the cattle drive from Oregon to Montana in which Lat participates, sums up the prevailing attitude when he says, "Tastes got a right to diffeh." (p. 11) One of the drovers supports the same attitude by telling his companions, "People's free to pick the sho't end of the stick," (p. 37) when there arises a controversy about the qualities of various regions of the United States.

Lat's grandfather, who led the wagon train to Oregon, understands his grandson's desire to help make the vast territory of Montana with its wide variety of inhabitants a part of the United States. As his grandson prepares to leave his Oregon home, Lije sings a settler's tune:

Then hip-hurrah for the prairie life!

Hip-hurrah for the mountain strife!

And if rifles must crack, if swords we must draw,

Our country forever, hurrah! hurrah! (p. 10)

And the settlement of the Great Plains thus ends the  
open frontiers of the West.

## THE LAST FRONTIER

Of Guthrie's three novels, These Thousand Hills is clearly the weakest. Perhaps the reason for the shortcomings of the novel lies in the fact that the frontiers of the high plains do not call forth the romantic images of the frontiers of the mountains or the great northwest portrayed in The Big Sky and The Way West. Then too, Guthrie may have had more to work with in the sense of allure and adventure found in the more primitive nature of the earlier frontiers. The Big Sky is generally an outstanding book with colorful description and realistic detail. The dangers are honestly portrayed and a sense of impending change is well developed by Guthrie. The Way West is also well written, though to a lesser degree than The Big Sky. The humdrum day-to-day monotony of the wagon train's advance incorporated in Guthrie's description is perhaps the real strength of the novel.

The overall effectiveness of the three novels lies in Guthrie's characterization. On each of the frontiers of the trilogy the characters develop a strength and cunning to survive the wilderness. Their need for freedom lies behind their developing self reliance, courage, ruthlessness, and skills which lead them to their dreams. In some cases, the dreams become at least a momentary reality, as with Lije Evans, who treks to Oregon, only to find as years go by that life is no different there. In

other cases, the dreams can never become a reality. Boone's way of life is doomed. The primitive surroundings are bound to come to an end and Boone, fit only for the primitive life, ironically becomes a subject of pity because he has nowhere to go. He has destroyed a part of himself by helping to eliminate the wilderness, the only place he can survive; he cannot farm as does his former mentor, Dick Summers; he cannot return to his Kentucky home permanently; he cannot take up with the Indians again; he is a mythic man who simply disappears after having cut himself off from civilization. The land is no longer there for him and thus his strength diminishes. Guthrie says of his research about the mountain man,

Each man kills the thing he loves. No men ever did it more thoroughly or in a shorter time than the fur hunters of General Ashley and Jed Smith and Jim Bridger. For a short thirty years they knew their paradise--freedom, excitement, adventure, solitude, the cozy satisfaction of planting feet where white feet had not trod before. And then it was all over. . . . Nothing was left.<sup>32</sup>

For personal reasons, national reasons, financial reasons, settlers continued to invade the frontiers

of the West. But Turner expressed the view in his presentation to the American Historical Association that America has no more frontiers. According to an 1890 U. S. census report, Turner says, the last frontier closed with the presence at that time of "isolated bodies of settlement" in previously unsettled areas. Turner says, with the closing of the frontiers, "The first period of American history has closed."<sup>33</sup>

Turner's frontier thesis has met with a great deal of criticism, mostly based on the theory that Turner exaggerated the frontier's importance. Turner critics say that rather than being the result of the frontiers, democracy is a part of the English heritage; and, in addition, democracy did not occur everywhere in America, the slave South, for example. In terms of his "safety valve" theory, Turner has been criticized because those who Turner said took advantage of the frontier as a means of escape were actually those who lacked both funds and knowledge to do so. Some of his critics theorize that the frontiers actually opened as a result of industrial expansion. Harry McPherson has summed up the current disillusionment with Turner's thesis:

He [Turner] had romanticized the frontier, where there was, it appeared, social strati-

fication and racial strife, and to which displaced Eastern workers were drawn less easily than he had assumed. Turner's nationalism came to seem myopic in a more interdependent world. His passion for the independent spirit, and for rural values, seemed quaint in an urban industrial society.<sup>35</sup>

In general, those who disavow Turner's frontier hypothesis base their disapproval on his hazy terminology and methodology.

On the other hand, defenders of the frontier thesis profess that it should be judged by the very fact that Turner's paper was actually a "gigantic step forward in American historiography and should be judged in this light." If the theory possesses contradictions, Turner advocates reason that the general nature of the paper makes its weaknesses inevitable.<sup>35</sup> Regardless, the frontier thesis has made an impact on understanding American history.

In addition to historical understanding, American mythology has been enriched by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Turner attempted to explain the national character, a nebulous quality which is difficult to pinpoint at best, and Turner attributed that national character or spirit to the conditions dependent on

the ever-present frontier. According to William Coleman, "The power of Turner's frontier thesis derived from its combination of the poetic imagery of the American West and the premises of evolutionary human geography."<sup>36</sup>

Then too, literature has profited. In the article "A. B. Guthrie, Jr., and the West," Dayton Kohler says the frontier's "emotional and moral forces are still unspent. We take certain habits of our minds and nerves from the frontier experience . . ." and he continues, "the story of westward expansion is the fundamental American experience. It gives life and drama to our history. . . ." <sup>37</sup> One point on which many would agree is that the frontier, however temporary a place or territory, was a dominating process for those involved and is a dominating influence on the thinking and beliefs and actions of modern times. Kohler adds, "The frontier experience gave us . . . our tormenting restlessness, our social and racial tensions, and the sense of loneliness which Europeans have often noted, a feeling of isolation and lostness. . . ." <sup>38</sup>

So naturally the adventures of the frontiers and the participants have made their way into American life and literature, have resulted in myths which persist in written form, are echoed in the ideas and attitudes of Americans, past, present, and future. The themes of natural nobility and physical adventures emanating from

the frontier experience have found their place in the drama of history, literature, and society of America. And the frontier thesis presented by Turner has also left its mark:

As much as any one man has in the past century, Turner shaped the way we see ourselves . . . the frontier was more than a means of explaining history. It was the crucible in which the most desirable human characteristics--as well as the most excessive, lawless and acquisitive ones--were forged.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps Turner was wrong in one respect. Perhaps the last frontier has not been found. Americans still find new frontiers. They conquer space; they land on the moon; they send satellites to Venus and Mars. They still look for unclimbed mountains. They still look to the unknown depths of the seas. They still drive themselves to set new records whatever the arena may be. Perhaps an American is not an American if he is not looking for new frontiers to conquer, another garden.

Or perhaps it really is the land itself which influences the American. In a 1949 graduation address at Montana University, Guthrie described his feeling that the land is a force much greater than man. He said,

Maybe it's space and climate that gives the Montanan [American?] his humor, his readiness to accept, his unwillingness to exaggerate self. Montana [America?] is mighty country-- bad lands, high plains, foothills, mountain spurs, mountains, valleys. It is rugged. It possesses a grand beauty. Any way the eye looks it is filled with nothing, said an Easterner who couldn't see. The grandeur, the unpredictability of the place, make concern incongruous.<sup>40</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry David Thoreau, The Best of Walden and Civil Disobedience. (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1975), p. 242.

<sup>2</sup>Walt Whitman, Preface, Leaves of Grass, 1st ed. (1855; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1959), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Harold L. Hurwitz, "Frontier Theory: Shadow or Substance?" Senior Scholastic, 7 Oct. 1959, p. 19T.

<sup>4</sup>William Coleman, "Science and Symbol in the Turner Frontier Hypothesis," American Historical Review, No. 72 (1966), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893, pp. 221-227.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 226-227.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 200-201.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>15</sup>Coleman, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 292.

<sup>17</sup>Coleman, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>19</sup>A. B. Guthrie, "Characters and Compassion," The Writer, No. 62 (1949), p. 360.

<sup>20</sup>Jackson K. Putnam, "Down to Earth: A. B. Guthrie's Quest for Moral and Historical Truth," North Dakota Quarterly, 39, No. 4 (1971), 49-50.

<sup>21</sup>Donald C. Stewart, "A. B. Guthrie's Vanishing Paradise: An Essay on Historical Fiction," Journal of the West, No. 15 (1976), p. 93.

<sup>22</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., "The West Is Our Great Adventure of the Spirit," Life Magazine, 13 April 1959, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup>Turner, p. 200.

<sup>24</sup>Richard W. Etulain, "A. B. Guthrie: A Bibliography," Western American Literature, No. 4 (1969), p. 133.

<sup>25</sup>Guthrie, "The West Is Our Great Adventure of the Spirit," p. 94.

<sup>26</sup>Turner, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup>Gilbert D. Coon, "A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s Tetralogy: An American Synthesis," North Dakota Quarterly, 44, No. 2 (1976), 74.

<sup>28</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big Sky, New Bantam ed. (1947; rpt. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p. 168. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

<sup>29</sup>Turner, p. 227.

<sup>30</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Way West, New Bantam ed. (1947; rpt. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p. 130. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

<sup>31</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., These Thousand Hills (1956; rpt. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 78. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

<sup>32</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., "The Historical Novel," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 51.

<sup>33</sup>Turner, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup>Harry McPherson, "Shaping the Way We See Ourselves: Frederick Jackson Turner, by Ray Alan Billington: A Review," The New Republic, No. 168 (1973), pp. 27-28.

<sup>35</sup>Gene M. Gressley, "The Turner Thesis--A Problem in Historiography," Agricultural History, No. 32 (1958), p. 248.

<sup>36</sup>Coleman, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup>Dayton Kohler, "A. B. Guthrie, Jr., and the West," College English, No. 12 (1951), p. 252.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>McPherson, pp. 26-27.

<sup>40</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., "Twenty-Six Years After. . . ." Montana University graduation address, Missoula, 12 July 1949.

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