

COWBOYS, INDIANS, LOG CABINS, wagon trains. These and other images associated with stories about the frontier maintain a constant presence in our lives. Innumerable products are marketed according to assumptions that symbols of the frontier are deeply embedded in Americans' notions of who we are and what we want to be. "Somewhere along the line everybody wants to be a cowboy," intones the narrator of a radio advertisement for pickup trucks. Mounted in the fall of 1994 at the Newberry Library, "The Frontier in American Culture" explores our national preoccupation with frontier images, metaphors, stories, and reenactments.

In 1893 the Columbian Exposition brought to Chicago two men, each of whom told a story about the American frontier and the American West. "The Frontier in American Culture" is an exhibition about the stories told by this unlikely duo—a University of Wisconsin history professor, Frederick Jackson Turner, and the most flamboyant showman in late-nineteenth-century America, "Buffalo Bill" Cody. The stories differed in genre, tone, and content. Nevertheless, we have paired them here, just as they were paired in Chicago in 1893, because they invariably exist in relation to each other—whether separate or entangled.

Frederick Jackson Turner told—and subsequently published—a story presented in the form of historical scholarship. For all its later influence, relatively few people actually heard his Chicago paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." This story of the peaceful settlement of "free" land, framed as a sweeping explanation of the evolution of a uniquely democratic, individualistic, and progressive American character, attained its initial influence among Turner's academic colleagues. Partly because of its resonance with existing images and stories, Turner's version of American history and character spread easily—through the classroom, through journalism, and through popular histories. The notion that the West was something we settled, rather than conquered, pervades

American storytelling and iconography; the contrast with the Spanish conquistadores has never been subtle either in popular culture or in elementary and secondary education texts.

Turner's story marginalized Indians, virtually dismissing them as merely a part of the wilderness environment. Buffalo Bill, on the other hand, presented to his much broader audience a narrative filled with Indians—warriors who had to be conquered if America was to fulfill its destiny. His "Wild West" extravaganzas reproduced classic "western" scenes, most of which entailed major roles for guns and large animals. A re-creation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, "Custer's Last Stand," often stood at the center. Cody's dramatization, more accessible and more sensational than Turner's essay (which itself is strikingly readable compared with stereotypical academic prose), gained more immediate and direct influence. Thousands of Americans saw each performance of his Wild West extravaganza, which he never called a show because that would have suggested it was something less than a true story. It was, of course, much less—or more, considering Cody's capacity to invent and embellish. Whatever one's skepticism about scholarly objectivity and the implications of the historian's power to select the elements of a narrative, one cannot doubt that Cody's narrative was, in a sense, less "true" than Turner's. But it was equally, if not more, influential, and therefore sufficiently important historically to stand alongside Turner's essay.

"The Frontier in American Culture" juxtaposes these two powerful narratives of the frontier, narratives that agree on the fact of significance but not its content. A "story about stories," the exhibition explores how a belief in the significance of the frontier emerged as what the historian Warren Susman has described as "the official American ideology." As consumers, readers, or travelers, Americans are surrounded with, and surround themselves with, the frontier metaphors described in Patricia Limerick's essay in this volume. As an aspect of our collective consciousness, the frontier has become virtually irremovable. That "constructed" frontier, however, has been anything but immutable. Richard White's essay, like the exhibition itself, explains how diverse groups of Americans have asserted their legitimacy in American culture by clothing themselves

(both literally and metaphorically) in frontier garb and revising frontier narratives to accommodate their histories. By presenting the creation, fate, and significance of frontier stories, the exhibition challenges its audience to think about the relation between history, popular culture, and national identity.

This relation underlies the evolution of the exhibition itself. “The Frontier in American Culture” was conceived originally as a commemoration (although not a celebration) of Turner’s address at the Columbian Exposition. Working on the assumption that the Turner thesis itself exercises little continuing influence on modern scholarship, the Newberry in 1990 asked Richard White to develop an exhibition that would be “less a retrospective view than a prospective one.” Indeed, White was among the scholars whose exciting new work on the American West self-consciously avoided both Turner and the idea of the frontier. But both Turner and retrospect were, in fact, inescapable. In the early 1990s a curious phenomenon was emerging in the national press—curious, at least, to a generation of “New Western Historians” who were suddenly a focus of attention in major newspapers and magazines and on radio. This remarkable media interest in “anti-Turnerian” scholars and their work owed to the “discovery” by journalists that the “frontier thesis” they had learned in school bore little relation to contemporary scholarship on the West.

The questions reporters asked, and the stories they wrote (and continue to write), assumed that Turner still occupied the center of an academic debate. Yet most academics had relegated him to the periphery years ago. Historians thus found themselves summoned by reporters to reargue a series of controversies they had assumed were as dead as Turner himself. The frontier thesis in the minds of reporters, and apparently their readers, remains vital; it persists as the standard explanation of western and American exceptionalism. It remains so deeply embedded in a wider constellation of images about the West and the United States that the reporters regarded any questioning of it as radical and daring.

Many professional historians reacted to the media stories with understandable bewilderment. How could recent criticism of Turner’s frontier thesis serve as the basis for a new history when the thesis had possessed

limited influence among academic historians for nearly half a century? What historians were forgetting was the vast gap between academic and popular notions of the past. To most Americans the Turnerian frontier (though few knew it was “Turnerian”), along with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, constituted our frontier heritage.

The deep significance many Americans attach to this heritage emerged even more dramatically in the controversy over “The West as America,” a 1991 exhibition at the National Museum of American Art. Labels accompanying the familiar work of such artists as Frederic Remington informed viewers that what seemed simple depictions of western life and events were actually “ideological narratives.” In a tone the museum director later admitted could have been “lighter,” labels explicitly confronted the paintings, castigating the artists for their ideas about race, class, gender, and war. A record number of visitors passed through the galleries, generating a remarkable guest book. The comments, which ranged from accolades to the dismissal of the exhibition as “perverse,” are striking for their extent and vehemence. Two United States senators (at least one of whom had not seen the show) voiced their outrage over the Smithsonian’s complicity in debunking our frontier.

Like the media coverage of the New Western History, the controversy over “The West as America” exhibition highlighted the gap between scholarly trends and popular understandings of history. But rather than make this a cause for lamentation or the occasion for propagating a “correct” view, we decided to ask why this aspect of American history resonated among the public with such depth and emotion. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the answer lies in the common concerns that underlie even the most contradictory frontier narratives. Americans continue to tell variants of these stories because they are as much about the American future as the American past. The legacy of the histories enacted in Turner’s essay and on Cody’s stage tell us not only who we were (and are) but how we got to be that way, and who among us gets to be included in the “we.” “A settler pushes west and sings his song,” asserted Ronald Reagan in his second inaugural, “that’s our heritage, that’s our song.” It is “the American sound.” Understanding the stories generated by the fron-

tier and the symbols that constitute its song helps us to reflect on whether there is a single “American sound.” Perhaps there are many American sounds, each (like Turner and Cody) at once compatible and in conflict with one another.

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“The Frontier in American Culture” is a library exhibition comprising mainly books, manuscripts, and other library materials. The heart of this exhibition draws substantially on two collections at the Newberry, the Everett D. Graff Collection of Western Americana and the Edward E. Ayer Collection (focusing on European exploration, pioneer experiences, and Native Americans). These might be described as quintessentially “Turnerian” collections: Turner’s fascination with the West was a more sophisticated version of the preoccupations of collectors such as Ayer and Graff. Similarly, the growing interest of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century midwesterners in the histories of their families and communities underlies the origins of the Newberry’s extraordinary local and family history collection. Once gathered, collections like those at the Newberry shape our national stories by influencing what scholars see when they come to do research. Historians today come to the Newberry to write new stories, based on earlier collectors’ notions of the significance of the frontier.

As a presentation primarily of library materials, therefore, “The Frontier in American Culture” suggests how library collections reflect trends in scholarship and popular culture while nurturing the evolution of each. Visitors not only see the variety and range of the Newberry collections in a particular subject area but also understand why such a collection exists, why and how it evokes particular sentiments, and how historians use it to construct narratives and explanations. While individual books, films, and other modes of communication generally tell a single story—even if a complex one—a library houses innumerable stories. Indeed, the urge to continue building a collection rests on the recognition that new perspectives are constantly emerging, raising new questions and laying frameworks for new stories.