

From the Director

by Dan Petegorsky

America's fascination with the settlement of the West reached a peak this fall with the airing of Ken Burns' documentary on the Lewis and Clark expedition. That continuing fascination is reflected across our culture, penetrating the national psyche at a time when the West is undergoing a dynamic process of re-settlement.

The vehicles of suburban migration today hearken back to the 19th century explorers. Or voyagers. Pathfinders. Scouts. Rangers, Blazers, Troopers, Broncos, and Discoveries. And while the landscape of the West has undergone dramatic change since the railroads brought waves of immigrant workers and settlers to the region in the last century, the fault lines of Western politics are surprisingly similar to those in evidence a hundred years ago.

Concentration of capital and power; fears of new, fast changing urban environments; backlash against increasingly vigorous union organizing; and hostility towards the immigrant workers on whom commercial development was so dependent — these themes resonate from the boom times of the past to the boom times of the present. As our states have undergone the most rapid economic growth in the country, effects of that growth have placed increasing strains on communities and constituencies grappling for ways to adjust.

A region that, in popular imagination, conjures up images of wide open range land, towering peaks and powerful rivers now hosts the most strongly concentrated, urbanized population in the country. And the benefits and costs of growth are not equally distributed, creating both big winners and big losers. Newer communities secure high resources with few associated social needs, while older communities are drained of resources even as their needs rise. Mounting pressures on families and communities create a receptive audience for charged and scapegoating messages.

Similar tensions affect our rural communities.

While cattle and sheep defined the range wars of the last century, hogs are the little dogies now making their way up into the Wyoming of the 1990s. And North Carolina's biggest pork producers are establishing what will soon become the world's largest hog farms in the valleys of southwestern Utah. Together with the legion of environmental problems associated with industrial scale corporate hog production, development of Circle Four Farms promises ample social tensions as well.

The farms will generate a need for slaughterhouses far beyond the capacity currently available at facilities near Los Angeles. If the pattern established in the South holds true, the new local facility contemplated for Utah will draw a largely immigrant workforce into a white, Mormon community of 1,500. "It needs to be somewhere else," said the mayor of Milford, up until now a big league hog booster.

The sentiment that "it needs to be somewhere else" resonates across the region, whether in reference to the Milford slaughterhouse or to the location of affordable housing in Portland's suburbs. The right has been quick to exploit such tensions. Our op-ed pages are rife with pieces blaming immigrants for lowering the "quality of life" in communities, lowering wage scales, and so on.

Progressive community and statewide organizations are not immune from these messages. Tensions between immigrant rights advocates and environmentalists, for example, have been growing both in our region and across the country, as more mainstream environmental organizations (like the Sierra Club) come under pressure to adopt anti-immigrant positions as part of their broader focus on population control and growth management. Unless we are able to get out ahead of such tensions, they are likely to divide allies and set back our work together.

A river never divides flowing down. But in uncharted territory it can often be hard to tell which way the river flows. ■



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