VOLUME XXXV, NO. 43
OCTOBER 27, 1982

STAYING WITH THE LAND

II

I HAVE been informed that the reason the grasslands have become brown lands in the West is because "it just doesn't rain like it used to"; other believers remind me that whenever a resource is exhausted in one location, another deposit always turns up somewhere else anyway, and there is no evidence so far to believe it will ever be different. My problem is just marked down as a lack of the proper faith; so I have taken to avoiding that dog-eared debate wherever possible, and devoting my attention to things around which I can still manage to weave a context of hope. Like ranching in the Rockies.

Rocky Mountain ranching of course inherits a lot of its conscious style from the flamboyant and devil-may-care nature of the range-miners and their "hands," the cowboys, of whom it has been said with every favorable and unfavorable inflection, "they didn't give a good goddam." Range-miners as a rule were more colorful than either ranchers or coal-miners, or lawyers or brokers or just about anyone else for that matter, which is probably why an increasingly colorless, and predictable generation of Americans has taken to dressing up like cowboys.

But the shape of their hats and cut of their pants to one side for a moment, the landscape the Rocky Mountain ranchers work in hardly seems derivative of the range-miners: most of it has been used for at least three generations now, and the majority of it is still green as the nonranching green lands that are juxtaposed against the brown lands down in the North Fork.

The green lands there were the product of that American type known as the homesteader—the "settler," for unlike the various breeds of miners, who came for a specific reason and left when their reason for coming was gone, the homesteaders came to stay, "to settle." But it is increasingly difficult to say for what reason.

Down in the North Fork, the settlers began growing fruit on some of the land they had turned from the natural gray-green to the brilliant green of irrigated agriculture. It was good fruit and found enough of a market to attract the railroad, which arrived in 1902, bringing with it more settlers.

But it misses some essential point to say the settlers came just because they wanted to grow fruit—the way the range-miners came because they wanted the grass. The Fruitland Mesa experience shows this. When water was led out onto the barrens of Fruitland Mesa, early this century, the developers advertised the great fruit-growing potential of the area. However, from the bottomlands of the North Fork to Fruitland Mesa is a deceptive climb of almost 1500 feet of altitude; and that, it turned out, was sufficient to delay and shorten the growing season. Settlers on the edge of the mesa could look out over the valley and see the green blush of spring spreading through the North Fork orchards, while they were still fighting the winter-starved deer away from their unbudded trees; and by the time their fruit was ready for harvest in the fall, the market was already glutted with lower-altitude fruit. In addition, there turned out to be not enough dependable water for a major fruit industry on Fruitland Mesa.

When the marginality of the land for fruit became evident, some of the settlers left Fruitland to relocate in the valley, because they did in fact want to raise fruit. But others stayed—either because they wanted to or couldn't afford not to—and adapted their settlers' dreams to the reality of the land; and some people came up from the valley

(like Charles Klasseen's family) because they liked the logical adaptation, which was cattle-raising. There was enough water and a long enough growing season to bring in a good hay crop for the necessary winter feed; and most of the rest of the land was too high, dry, and cold for anything but grazing. There was, and is, one thing you could do with marginal western lands to make them productive, and that is to run a four-legged forager over it to convert low quality scattered vegetation to high quality concentrated protein. That became the pattern of settlement for all the Crawford country: a hybrid with one foot in the green-lands settlement and the other foot in the industry that created the brown lands.

We have already seen, however, how terminally marginal mountain ranching is from an economic perspective—"the brown-lands mining-economy bottom line" of urban-industrial America. And its marginality in the cattle industry is clearly associated with its green-lands qualities the necessary hay production, and the geographic limitations that keep the mountain cattle operation small. (Interestingly, the average mountain ranch, as it has evolved, is fairly close to the "pasturage homestead" proposed a century ago by the West's only true green-lands visionary, John Wesley Powell: four sections—2560 acres—of grazing land, with twenty or thirty acres under irrigation for winter feed and home garden.)

Does it make any sense, then, to say that we probably ought to look back into that green-lands heritage to try to understand the persistence, stability, and present dilemma of the mountain rancher, rather than confining ourselves as usual to the "brownlands bottom line"?

But the problem there is the fact that no one, not even most of the green-lands settlers themselves, ever seem to have figured out exactly what that heritage was, or is. From our history, we know that there was a vision over the green lands—almost a visionary religion of a landbased utopia, which flourished best, not in the rural environments (where people might have known better), but in the rank slums and factory districts of industrial cities, first in Europe and England, then in eastern America as well. Call it "agrarianism," "the Jeffersonian republic"—but mostly call it vague, for that is mostly what it was: a semi-articulated vision whose most basic elements were Jefferson's "cultivators of the soil" and the "family farm"; these elements at various times cobbled into larger structures like "the village," "the grange," this or that "national farm alliance" or third party; and the vagueness embellished with adjectives like "self-reliant," "independent," and "populist."

Yet it contended for the continent, that vision did, even in its half-formed and semi-articulated state. But everywhere that the still-evolving "Jeffersonian" went, looking for a place to work out his agrarian alternative, the empire-builders from Alexander Hamilton's federal city were right behind him—or, if he were so naïve as to come by train, there ahead of him: bankers ready to loan him 12% money to get under way (the standard rate in the cattle industry up till the Depression), brokers ready to buy up his whole crop for shipment to the city's mills. . . . There was no vagueness or incoherence there: we brought the blueprint for this city-and-province economic imperialism from England; and when I look into the ruthless gusto with which that blueprint was applied to the American West by the American East, I wonder whether the American Revolution was fought for freedom from that mercantilism or just over patent rights on it. Both, I suppose: depending on whether your heroes were at Valley Forge with Washington or entertaining the British in New York.

But what chance did a vague and half-formulated agrarian dream have up against the networks of finance and transportation being strung up to feed and supply an urbanizing, industrializing empire? Ultimately, the vagueness of the vision, rather than the vision, became a kind of refuge: when you aren't sure exactly where it is you are trying to go, then you can assume that

maybe you are there when you reach a point from which it doesn't seem possible to go any further.

And so we have imagined, or pretended, that this great agrarian dream was at least to some extent realized, and is still somehow part of "what makes America great today." Our chief evidence for this belief, or illusion, is the fact that most of the farms and ranches in the country are still in the hands of "family farmers." But about all that means today is that the name on the mortgage papers down in the vaults at the local extension of the great webwork of finance is not the name of a "foreign investor" or major urban corporation but an individual. A more accurate appraisal of the state of the "agrarian alternatives" in Crawford today is written in the weekly skirmishes at the local sale yard, the livestock auction thirty miles down the road in Delta, where the Crawford cattleman is offered 65 cents a pound for his cattle, and has to take it, not because he wants to but because he has a payment to make at the bank.

The amounts of the notes the ranchers are trying to pay off today are an even better measure of the degree to which the old agrarian dream has become lost in its own vagueness. Since World War II, total farm indebtedness has increased more than twelvefold, to something over $150 billion today. Family-size ranching operations around Crawford commonly run on annual "operating loans" of around a quarter million dollars. And "operating loan" has become a euphemism for a practice of borrowing in advance everything a rancher or farmer plans to spend, not just for the farming operation itself, but for everything in or around the house as well—groceries, clothing, entertainment, college tuition, the whole mainstream American pie—then hoping that the sale of the calves will cover the loan. When it hasn't—and it certainly hasn't recently—they have been able to carry over a balance, increasing their indebtedness by the amount of the increase in the value of their land.

But however acceptable it might be in the world of modern finance—this business of spending what you don't have yet, then borrowing more to cover what you didn't get—it has nothing in common with the old agrarian vision of the independent and self-reliant farmer. Bound into the webs and nets of finance as he is—and kept there by chronically marginal prices—the modern farmer or rancher is just about as independent and self-sustained today as his counterparts in lower-level management in the factories and office-warrens of the city—but with this exception: having refused to concede that in an economically-oriented mass society there is at least a kind of strength in numbers, the unorganized rancher is far more powerless than the factory worker whose union at least gives him a little economic clout. Not that that's a lot of help in Detroit today.

Ray Jergeson, a farmer and writer who has been working in the frustrating business of "farm organizing" in the Northwest, believes that the family farmer and rancher in America is in worse shape than he has ever been, and is being slowly but surely destroyed through what he calls "the laws of systems," of which the first is, "any group without a system of its own is doomed to serve that of another." And this is exactly what is going on every Thursday afternoon down at the Delta auction. Despite the folksy fair atmosphere of the occasion—the carnival frenzy of unloading and penning the animals from the lined-up trucks and semis and horsetrailers, the animal noise and smell, the joking and hawing and gossip among people who don't see each other often enough, the familiar old auction patter both hypnotic and galvanic—what is happening is that, one at a time and alone, the ranchers are going up against the biggest, most efficient, most sophisticated, and, under it all, most ruthless and desperate food-procurement system ever assembled. Ruthless *because* desperate: America today has close to a quarter billion people who don't feed themselves, and live at a distance from the food producers, creating a situation in which the actual production of the food is only a comparatively modest part of the total problem of feeding the multitudes.

Ruthlessness enters the game when the food-procurement system, urban-based and impelled by the collective subconscious anxiety of the quarter-billion, finds itself confronting a bunch of would-be individualists caught up in the shards and remnants of a never-assembled antique ideal, whose independent spirit is expressed mainly through totally unorganized over-production, no marketing structure other than the necessity compelled by the note payment, and a determined refusal to submit themselves to any kind of self-imposed organization that might make the business of feeding the cities more predictable and rational. Given such a situation, the food-procurement system literally has no choice but to apply another of Jergeson's "laws of systems": "When any group controls a commodity or service necessary to an essential industry but refuses to contract for orderly delivery at fair profit levels, they will find that basic commodity forced out of them by repressive means." Sixty-five cents a pound.

"The rancher has lost control over his product." It seems clear enough that the rancher's situation will only continue to deteriorate so long as he continues to put off the task of assembling some kind of system to work in the context of—something with more substance and structure than the vagueness compounded of Jeffersonian idealism, reactionary population, and Louis L'Amour *machismo.* But before he can do that, I think, he has to make a cultural decision about what his "product" is: has to decide, in other words, whether he wants to put both feet in the brown lands—along with most of the rest of America—or whether he is desperate enough to try something really interesting, like taking a strong and finally thought-out stand in the green lands.

If he decides his product is just his cattle, then he might as well take the final step over into the brown lands of urban-industrial America, form a marketing union or coop, and start acting like an economic animal, predictable and dependable. From the start of the cattle industry—from the time the railroad ran out to the prairie settlement of Abilene and started the first cowtown—the industry has been owned and operated by the urban food-procurement system; and the best the cattleman will be able to do there is help himself by being a bigger help to the system: getting the Brotherhood of Saddle Vassals together to "contract for orderly delivery at fair profit levels."

But if, on the other hand, the rancher decides he is of the direct lineage of the green-lands builder who came west looking for some vague but intensely desired alternative to that urban-industrial world: who started raising some cattle because cattle were what fit the land best, but who also had a field in wheat or rye, and an acre in corn and another in spuds, and who undertook to break some range cows to the milkstool the way they did in Crawford when cattle weren't worth a nickel a hundredweight and who took his profits from the year prices were good and bought a secondhand sawmill or a backhoe instead of just more cows—well, what was that man's product? The only way to encompass it all is to point to the ranch itself: his farm, his life, was his product.

But—and here is a kind of paradox that became a serious sticking-point for the whole vague vision—*he* had to have a "system" too: an independent and self-reliant way of life is quite dependent and reliant on institutions that nourish and support independence and self-reliance. Call it the paradox of Crawford, which was a different sort of cowtown from the Abilenes and Denvers.

Wandering around town, I've been trying to piece together that evolving system just from the boarded-up buildings. The old flour-mill, for example: who would ever think of a defunct flour-mill as a political or philosophical institution? Yet the farmer who can bring ten sacks of wheat to town and take home eight sacks of flour is a step closer to being able to tell the food-procurement system where it can go with its sixty-five cents. General Mills will provide him with a cost breakdown showing how much more economical

it is to buy their uniform-quality flour; but where in those calculations is there a line for "options surrendered," or "independence losses"?

In its heyday, Crawford had a cheese factory, a milk route, two stores set up for butchering, a bank, blacksmiths and garages, half a dozen grade schools scattered through the countryside and a high school in town. . . . Then came the thing that everybody mistook for the real freedom-machine, the automobile: everybody started going down the road for everything, just for variety; and one by one, the various elements of the evolving system being built to nurture independence and self-reliance in the green lands closed down.

Today, we sit in Crawford and wonder about the future without any sense of having a hand in its shaping. We tantalize, terrorize, and otherwise titillate ourselves with the possible and probable consequences of a real boom down in the North Fork. The ranchers wait for their lobbying organizations to bring home a farm bill that isn't an insult. The Cowbelles are engrossed in beef promotion programs to persuade "the consumer" that in spite of what somebody else's "nine doctors out of ten" say, it is still healthy, occasionally economical, and always patriotic to eat beef.

But the focus for everything is "elsewhere," out there in the larger world where the ten o'clock news comes from; before anything can happen in Crawford, good, bad, or indifferent, something has to happen in Washington, or Denver, or in the collective mind of the abstractions called "the government" or "the consumer" or "the public"—or worst of all, somewhere in the turbulent innards of the bloated and sickly statistical abstraction called "the economy."

I can't help but think how backwards this seems. There is no way, of course, that the most basic tie between the farm and the city can, or even should, ever be severed: food is one thing that the city cannot do without. But that being the case, how has it come to pass that the city so totally dominates the farm that there is a distinct possibility of "killing the goose" that lays its eggs? How can a "Secretary of Agriculture" get away with saying that "farm policy is too important to be left up to farmers"?

The only answer that makes sense is to say that thc farmers have let it happen. The farmers never had a real unobstructed chance to get their own agrarian alternative together—except where there was, and is, strong internal community discipline, usually religious, as with the Amish—and being unorganized, they were gradually won over with the promise that, if they couldn't have America on their terms, they could at least get rich along with the other America if they would just collaborate with the scientists and economists and turn their farms into food factories.

But they are still waiting for those promised riches. Maybe some day they will get tired of waiting; maybe some day we will all get tired of waiting for "enlightened self-interest" and "supply-side-ism" and the parade of other catch-titles for our brown-lands capitalism to give us that lasting prosperity, peace and security that is always "just around the corner" in the urban-industrial version of America. I'm tired of waiting: I have reached the point of finding a kind of perverse hope in the fact that not even a personable, sincere-seeming television personality like Ronald Reagan can dress up the corpse to fool me. I want to get about the business of rebuilding from the bottom up, rather than always waiting for the issue of bandaids to come down. And the older I get, the more impatient I get; sometimes I think I could be driven crazy by the possibility that the only life I get is going to be frittered away in an age of spiritual poverty, intellectual timidity, and massive paranoia, whose institutions only prove that people can consume the resources of the world at an unprecedented rate and still be unhappy, fear-ridden, bellicose, and essentially ignorant of themselves. I begin to understand the frustration that fuels revolution.

But I can also see how absolutely futile revolution is—and how impossible even, in the case of the agricultural sector at least today: the

farmers and ranchers of America wouldn't be able to stage a farm strike without getting extensions from their bankers, which kind of defuses the idea. Before there could be a true "Sagebrush Rebellion"—and there were no real "agrarians" in the front ranks of last year's media event in the West, just the usual provincializers in their folk costumes—the farmers and ranchers would have to get out of debt and "get control of their product": recapture their own vision. And if they were actually to do that, the real American revolution would finally be under way, and maybe with such a quiet and subtle force that it might go unnoticed until it was all but invincible.

Well, dream on, Sibley, and all you other fools that think that man was possibly meant to be more than the Economic Animal, and dream on about that undiscovered America which will be his home.

But the soil is at least still fertile for such thoughts in the green lands that are left. I recall an evening out talking to Jim and Sue Ayer. Jim is a third-generation rancher in the Crawford country, troubled today like everyone else here, but pretty determined: "There's a responsibility to being the third generation on a farm your people have worked to build up."

But it was something that Sue—a native of Denver—said that first made me realize the most essential fact about ranching in the Rockies. I was asking a lot of questions about the cattle business, when she broke in to set me straight on priorities. "You've got to understand, it's the land that's important to us, not the cattle. If we can't make it with cattle, we'll do something else with the land. One way or another, we'll stay with the land."

> Something we were withholding made us weak
> Until we found out that it was ourselves
> We were withholding from our land of living,
> And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
>
> —Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"

Crawford, Colorado GEORGE SIBLEY

REVIEW
SYNANON—ITS RISE AND FALL

SINCE, starting with Walker Winslow's "Ex-Addicts, Incorporated, in the Sept. 14, 1960 issue, MANAS gave repeated attention to the activity known as "Synanon" on the beach in Santa Monica, Calif., when David Gerstel's book, *Paradise Incorporated: Synanon* (Presidio Press, 1982, $15.95) came in for review it was picked up and read with immediate interest. Verdict: Gerstel has done a conscientious book and is as fair as he knows how to be to all concerned. For those for whom "Synanon" means little or nothing, this term originally stood for an association of former drug addicts who, under the inspiration of an ax-alcoholic, Charles E. Dederich, had joined with one another to stop using drugs (mostly heroin) and to learn how to live normal lives. It began in the late 1950s with a mixed assemblage of alcoholics and drug addicts who gathered in Dederich's apartment, then moved to a storefront in Venice, south of Santa Monica, where it grew to the point of being able to occupy the old armory at 1351 Ocean Front, Santa Monica. It was a year later, in the summer of 1960, when Walker Winslow and a MANAS editor visited the place and met a lot of the Synanon "Family," then numbering forty boys and fifteen girls, all infecting each other with the idea that they could live without heroin and help one another to get and stay clean.

In those days, the "atmosphere of getting well" was dense enough to touch within the doors of Synanon. And Dederich, whatever has happened to him since, was the chief producer of that atmosphere. What did happen to Dederich and Synanon, twenty years later, was well reported in the national press when, in July of 1980, Chuck Dederich was brought to trial in a Los Angeles County courthouse for conspiring to murder Paul Morantz, a young attorney who had opposed Synanon in legal actions. One day in 1978 Morantz reached into his mailbox and brought out a good-sized rattlesnake with its fangs sunk in the flesh of his hand. Morantz recovered, but Dederich was arrested in Arizona in December of that year. "He had to be carried out on a stretcher. He was helplessly drunk."

Gerstel's book is about what happened in Synanon during the last ten years of its history, with earlier years sketched in from the recollections of members who had joined much earlier. For this reason, one may think that this author has never directly encountered the extraordinary wonder of the lives of addicts in whom hope was reborn as a result of coming into Synanon and experiencing the impact of Dederich's influence. He encountered plenty of feeling—some of it deep—but in the 1970s this was probably thinning as nostalgic memory. Yet Gerstel does his level best to recreate the attitudes of members in the early days. In addition, he calls no names, makes no far-reaching moral judgments, even though, in the circumstance, this would be easy enough. For those wanting to understand the history—the sudden rise and the apparently sudden fall—of Synanon, his book seems about right. As the author shows, the suddenness of the fall was only apparent. It seemed to begin, for a MANAS contributor, when non-addicts—"squares," in the jargon of the street—began to be accepted as members. These people, whatever their motives, were lacking in the desperation of addicts who wanted to stop feeling doomed. When mere neurotics joined Synanon, they diluted the intensity of the struggle undertaken by the victims of drugs. Then, when the prohibition of violence was slackened, and using the tool of fear finally made a policy, a fundamental strength of the original Synanon was lost. Other factors, doubtless including Dederich's weaknesses—which seemed to be played upon by his strengths—were at work in the fall.

Dederich pleaded guilty (*nolo contendere*) to the charges against him and was put on probation for five years. Paul Morantz settled out of court for a rather large sum, and several civil actions against Synanon were similarly concluded.

Dederich, it appears, will suffer no personal financial embarrassments, according to Gerstel's account of funds he acquired during the late 1970s.

Why was Synanon such an inglorious failure? At the risk of being simplistic, one could say that so long as Synanon devoted itself to helping addicts to get control of their lives, its methods fitted the problem and its success confirmed what little theory was behind their efforts. The objective, though difficult, was finite and attainable. Saving the world is something else.

Drug addicts, Dederich used to say, are not very bright. When they came to Synanon, leached of will-power and sodden with indulgence, they were treated like puling infants and put to work at the lowest of menial tasks. "We treat them," Dederich said, "as they are." After a while, as they began to behave like human beings, they were treated as people in whom some dignity is dawning. It worked. The Game—in which the members tore each other apart—after which they became brothers and sisters again—also worked. One feature of the Game was that no one was permitted to have a private life. The most intimate details of human relationships were thrashed out in the "public" of the game sessions, along with less private matters. People were stripped bare—justly or unjustly, it didn't matter much. A sense of delicacy was jeered at as a veil to hide behind or a pose of sensibility. The method was rough and ready, but seemed to suit the needs of the players. People who use drugs coarsen themselves, and the remedy spoke to their condition. You could call it a brand of brainwashing, but this overlooks the fact that some kind of ego-synthesis seemed to be accomplished through the feeling of being stripped and starting again naked in the chameleon light of the Game. It was a way, one way—if not the best way—of generating faith in oneself and in the Synanon approach.

Synanon, in short, was a place where doubt was simply intolerable. Addicts become hopeless people, and when they find a refuge where renewed hope—some little shred of hope—becomes possible, they build on that for dear life. Chuck Dederich was ready and willing to be the unshakable Gibraltar of the process. He had the required qualities and plenty of love for those who accepted him in his role of exemplar. He also had extraordinary insight into the foibles of human nature. There were moments when he even seemed to understand himself. That capacity may now be wholly gone—worn away by pretensions that could never be fulfilled—but it was there, if on rare occasions, in the early days. And he *did* save people's lives.

His great mistake, perhaps inevitable, was to want Synanon to adopt a goal far beyond its original purposes. Gerstel writes:

> As the 1960s progressed, he found his next opportunity. A sizable portion of the American public was taking an interest in encounter groups and in communal living—two features already built into Synanon. Dederich began giving less emphasis to the view of Synanon as a "tunnel back into the human race" for addicts. Increasingly, he offered a vision of it as a new way of life of which recovery from addiction was by no means the most important by-product. Synanon was not going to merely rehab a few hundred or thousand addicts. It was going to create a new city, a model (it was said in exuberant moments) for the rehabilitation of the human species. And that was a project open to all people of good will, not just individuals who happened to have been drunks or addicts. In short, "Synanon I" was giving away to "Synanon II."

Who knows enough to reshape the human species? The Buddha couldn't do it, and it was too much for Christ. They described the means, or so many people think, but there was no way to enforce the rules of life they proposed. Enforcement meant caricature and defeat. The rules are known today, but they work only when voluntarily adopted and individually interpreted. To edit and codify those rules on the basis of how a few people have been able to free themselves from drug addiction or alcoholism, and then to try to *enforce* them as Dederich did, was a way of

stultifying human nature and calling it the good life.

Even so, the Synanon method of indoctrination was festooned with persuasive half-truths. Some were quotations from ancient sagacity, some were psychological insights that could hardly be contradicted. Gerstel, who spent years in Synanon, tells about his own doubts. The Synanon Center at Tomales Bay was made the headquarters of an "Academy" for promising young people who, it was hoped, would be the efficient managers of Synanon's future. Gerstel was an Academy member:

> At every moment, we could be called upon for more work, more study, more Gaming. There was no limit to the demands that could be made on us. We were called upon to trust but, in return, not trusted to direct our energies and efforts. I felt oppressed by the situation. And since the Academy was the seed of Synanon City [to be the Mecca of the great reform movement to come], I felt that it did not augur well for the community's future (Were we intending to build a totalitarian society?). I began in Games to try to voice my doubts.
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> In reply, I heard justifications for the Synanon system: dope fiends needed a high degree of external control. For the present, at least, Synanon had to have a strong central management that strictly controlled the community life. Synanon could not, for the sake of the petty freedoms of squares, dismantle the system upon which the lives of its dope fiend members depended. But more important than the response to my objections was the criticism leveled at me for having allowed myself to have had negative thoughts at all. . . .
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> It was only because of my unusual circumstance—that I had been brought into the Academy without having had the chance to go through the conversion process in another facility—that I was allowed at all to express negativity. . . . After the first two years of the Academy's existence, only the most zealous of the first class, which Charles Dederich had recruited when he founded the Academy in 1968, had survived the various winnowings of their ranks. As the most secure and knowledgeable of the Academy members, they dominated its Games and conversation. Through their combined efforts, they made its life an unending revival meeting with the air always full of enthusiastic talk about Synanon's prospects, accomplishments, and processes.

This seems a reasonable explanation of why Synanon lasted as long as it did, and finally why, as disillusionment became permanent, it seemed to disappear from the scene when Chuck Dederich disappeared. Gerstel's book is filled with raw material for the study of movements which attempt the impossible, or attempt the possible by means wholly inadequate to the ends in view.

COMMENTARY
HERE AND THERE

GEORGE SIBLEY, writer of the two-part lead article (concluded in this issue) about a part of Colorado, began to attract national attention in 1977 when *Harper's* (for October) published his report on coming water shortages in "The Desert Empire" of the American Southwest. He has that rare quality of being able to speak usefully to American readers at several levels of understanding, without talking down or up. Because he also has that strong sense of "place" that Wendell Berry speaks of, he writes mainly about Colorado, while using local conditions to illustrate dilemmas common to us all. His 1979 book, *Part of a Winter* (Harmony), (auto) biographical in the same way, reveals the texture of a thinking man who worked in a sawmill, edited a small-town paper, and delivered his own baby in a mountain cabin far from a hospital or a doctor. He has the natural melancholy of a somewhat withdrawn spectator of life in the present, but balances his sighs with murmuring and sometimes uproarious humor. No "alienated" artist, Sibley wrote, directed, and produced a fairground pageant recalling a hundred years of life in his part of the country, providing just the right touch for everyone's enjoyment. The actors, including pony soldiers, Indians, miners and tractors, were all local amateurs. He has also done a history of Crawford (where he lives) in collaboration with an old-timer of the region—in two small volumes, one on places, one about people.

MANAS is not the first publisher of "Staying with the Land." This article first appeared in *Western Colorado Report,* a fortnightly newspaper published and edited and mostly written by Ed and Betsy Marston, Ed a former physics professor, Betsy a New York journalist. Some eight years ago they decided to reinhabit the country and started a weekly in Paonia, Colorado (not far from Crawford), and after the success possible for such an enterprise decided that what was really needed was a *regional* paper—they don't use language like "bioregional," not yet—to draw people together in the larger community of the western slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. There may be a few other papers like *Western Colorado Report*—perhaps one in New England, another in California—but there is no better illustration of what journalism for the present and the future ought to be like (if we may say so). The address is Box V, Paonia, Colo. 81428, and the price $26.00 a year. The paper is factual, sprightly, sensible, and on occasion satyrical, with a pervasive touch of the idealism profoundly needed in the West, and already acceptable, here and there.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

VARIOUS ironies come to the surface in the Spring *Dædalus* review of "Black Africa: A Generation after Independence," the most striking being the contradictions of higher education. Population growth is a major factor, since "African fertility rates are the highest in the world," although with extreme regional and social variations. The gross figure in 1979 was a total of 458 million:

> Africa's population, which has more than tripled in the last fifty years, is today 30 per cent larger than that of Latin America and the Caribbean, but it is less than 20 per cent of that of Asia and only 10 per cent of the world's total. In fact, of the fifty-five nations and territories in Africa only thirteen have a population of more than 10 million and only six—Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Zaire, South Africa, and Morocco—have more than 20 million. Nigeria, with an estimated population of nearly 75 million, is the continent's largest country. Fifteen nations and territories, on the other hand, have a population of less than one million.

Emmanuel A. Ayandele discusses the great preoccupation of these African nations with the promise of higher education, as the means of achieving development comparable to that of Europe and America. He says:

> In their determination to make up for decades of the Rip Van Winkle affliction visited on their hapless continent by British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian colonial rulers—for whom the education of the African was not a priority—independent African states have been devouring Western education with a speed and gusto that makes no allowance for its healthful digestion in relation to society's social and economic well-being. Over the years, education has gobbled up between 10 and 30 per cent of national budgets, the unit cost of primary education in some countries being equivalent to the per capita income!

After an account of the failure of the African nations to bring the opportunity for higher education to more than 1.5 per cent of the young, this writer says:

> The African situation is compounded by two crucial factors. First, a population growth that cannot be matched by economic development is neutralizing pari pasu the frenetic efforts of African governments. Based on an annual rate of growth of 2.7 per cent—one of the highest in the world—the 1975 population of 401.3 million will more than double at the turn of the century to 816,131,000, with 46.4 per cent of that population expected to be under the age of fifteen. It requires no prophetic insight to see that the training of such a huge number of education-hungry youngsters will be one of the toughest challenges to statesmanship in Africa. Second, African states are caught between the Charybdis of wishy-washy education for the many and the Scylla of qualitative, but "elites"," education for the few. The former—which most politicians prefer—is part of the philosophy of social justice. For in the words of the Ministers of Education in 1976, "Education is an inalienable right which all (citizens) should be able to exercise." The alternative and more rational "elitist" policy harbors the serious danger of paving the way for the emergence of a "two nations" syndrome—a highly educated, privileged minority fording it over completely illiterate, but more than potentially restive, masses.

There is obvious difficulty in determining what higher education in Africa should be concerned with. Western models seem the only ones available, and these do not adapt well to African students. As Ayandele says:

> Thus, despite efforts made by African universities to give their curricula an African cast, they remain for the most part centers for the diffusion of Western culture. To use a biblical metaphor, although they have "left Egypt" in abandoning the cravings for "Brightness" or "Frenchness" or "Americanness," African universities are still far from Canaan, still far from becoming essentially African. This is why the training of Africans outside the continent has in no way made them more Western than their colleagues trained at home. The monolith that is their class—an overprivileged minority, "anointed" by university degrees—is by no means undermined. As such, they constitute a *new* class of human beings, mentally and culturally. Sandwiched between the indigenous world and that of the white man, they master neither, nor are they fully acceptable, or at home, in either. Culturally, they are amorphous, a class of Africans with an English, French, or American veneer. Or, in the language of Leopold Sedar Senghor, the one statesman who

understood that African nations must be erected on the base of their own culture, the educated elite in Africa are no more than "photographic negatives of the (former) colonizers." . . .

What are the elements of learning that should come together in a higher education for Africans? The question is presumptuous. That synthesis is for Africans to evolve, using for ingredients the authenticities of both Western intellectual and African culture, since true civilizations would be based on standards transcendent of both, as Frantz Fanon suggested years ago. Meanwhile, a way of setting the problem is available in a passage in a novel by Richard Llewellyn, *Man in a Mirror,* published in 1961. Here the author gives the reflections of a tribal leader, Nterenke, whose European education provided a perspective unknown to his fellow Africans. How, he wondered, could the spirit of African life be united with European ways of thinking?

> Nterenke began to realize with increasing dismay which he found almost comical that the Masai intellect held not the least notion of physical science, no philosophy, or sense of ideas in the abstract, or any mathematical processes higher than the use of the hands and fingers. He amused himself in trying to imagine how he might teach Olle Tselene the theory of the spectrum. Yet every tracker knew the value of sunlight in a dewdrop because the prism told where the track led and when it had been made. How the eye saw the colors or why the colors were supposed to exist was never a mystery or problem. They had no place anywhere in thought. But all male Masai, from the time they were Ol Ayoni, had a sharp sense of color from living in the forest and choosing plumage for the cap. . . . He wondered where the idea of color began, or why a scholar should interest himself. Mr. James had taught that sound politics led to a rich economy where people earned more money for less hours of work, and so created a condition of leisure needed by inventors, whether mental or physical. The Masai had always enjoyed an ample economy, if it meant a complete filling of needs, and after the animals were tended, there was plenty of leisure. Yet there were no inventors of any sort. There was a father-to-son and mouth-to-mouth passing of small items that pretended to be history, and a large fund of forest lore that might pass as learning, but there were no scholars, no artists, no craftsmen in the European sense.
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> The effect was to lock a growing mind in a wide prison of physical action and disciplined restriction that by habit became accepted as absolute liberty.

African writers of today will no doubt have corrections to make in Llewellyn's inventory of African cultural resources, yet the comparison may serve as provocation. Common sense suggests that higher education for Africa ought to be designed by African writers and artists who have themselves become masters of both cultures—of Africa and the West. For example, we would nominate the writer, Estwia Mphahlele, now professor of literature at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, but who spent nine years teaching in the United States. While at the University of Denver, he kept feeling that he and his wife "were irrelevant outside Africa."

> To whom was I teaching black literature in the United States—people genuinely interested in Africa, or merely students wanting to pick up an exotic grade? Should I not be where black literatures are organized and taught as a functional and organic part of African development, and located, therefore, where there is a living cultural forum for them—on their own native soil? . . .
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> We returned to find most things had not changed, except for the worse. But my wife and I find that we can achieve a number of things in our professions that as long as we were outsiders, we could not. Now we have community.

Interested readers might find it useful to look up Prof. Mphahlele's article, "The Fabric of African Culture," in *Foreign Affairs* for July, 1964, and those whose file of back volumes of MANAS include 1965 will find a lead article by him on cultural activity in Africa in the Aug. 25 issue.