Rural Frontier Values Conflict with Current Realities in North-Eastern Arizona

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Introduction

Northeastern Arizona, an immense region covering more than 41,000 sq. km. (29,000 sq. mi.), includes Navajo, Apache, and Gila counties. Despite its great size and wide open spaces, land available for private development is in short supply. This is because the lion's share of the region is owned and controlled by various federal agencies and the Indian nations. In Northeastern Arizona, less that 12 percent of the land is in private ownership.

Less than 181,000 people live and work in Navajo, Apache and Gila counties. Native Americans, primarily members of the Navajo, Hopi and Apache Nations, account for approximately half of the total population. The remainder are of Anglo (White) and Hispanic origins (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1994: 32-33). With few exceptions, most Anglo residents of Northeastern Arizona come from farming, ranching, logging or mining families and the majority are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Whereas federal policies and mandates have significant impacts in all states, the fact that the forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) control vast tracts of Northeastern Arizona serves to greatly intensify the importance of federal policies in this part of the Southwestern United States. Over the years, even before current dissatisfactions with Secretary of the Interior Babbitt, the people of rural Northeastern Arizona have become increasingly indignant about federal control of land and resources in their counties. At a recent meeting of the Eastern Arizona Counties Organization (ECO), an official of Apache County described the federal government as "the enemy". The most visible issues include the timber cutting policies of the Forest Service, the protection of endangered species by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and the angel and management practices of the BLM. Many residents would like to see the Environmental Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and other such federal legislation repealed, or at least modified. They also call for a sizable reduction in the land/resource management role of federal agencies in their region.

Whereas conflict between local residents and the federal government centers on a few clearly defined issues, less obvious, but perhaps even more pervasive concerns motivate the Anglo population of Northeastern Arizona to tenaciously fight for local control of the region's land and resources. In order to understand the underlying causes of the current tension between federal agencies and the Anglo community of rural Northeastern Arizona, it is necessary to examine the historic roots of the local non-Native American culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine and identify the roots of the conflict between the rural Anglo communities of Northeastern Arizona and the federal agencies charged with management of the public lands and resources in the region.

Standing Ground and Preserving the Culture

Over the past few years, increasing numbers of conservative politicians have won state and federal elections. Most of the winners of the last congressional election ran on platforms that were decidedly anti/federal and strongly committed to increasing the power of state and

local governments.

In the West, during the 1970s, grass/roots opposition to the policies and roles of federal agencies became a ground swell after the introduction in congress of the Federal Land Policy and management Act (FLPMA). The FLPMA became law in 1976, and it created a firestorm of resistance. Ranchers resented the range management requirements and most citizens of rural counties did not believe that more land should be designated as “wilderness”. By the summer of 1979, negative reaction to the FLPMA had been dubbed the “Sagebrush Rebellion”. Two states passed sagebrush legislation and presidential candidate Ronald Reagan bragged that he too was a “Sagebrush Rebel”. In response to such strong opposition, the Carter administration decided to relax its efforts to designate wilderness areas in the West. When President Clinton took office, little was heard about the Sagebrush Rebellion, and many believed the movement dead.

President Clinton, like President Carter before him, is committed to a strong pro-environmental protection stance by the federal government. In keeping with this philosophy, he put Bruce Babbitt, former governor of Arizona, in charge of the Department of the Interior. Almost immediately, Babbitt’s intent to increase grazing fees, tighten mining regulations, and vigorously enforce environmental protection laws, coupled with decisions by the Forest Service to reduce the size of the timber harvest, caused great resentment in Northeastern Arizona. Among those most vocally challenging the power of the federal government to regulate the use of land and resources in Arizona are the members of the lobbying group, People for the West. This group, which first came together in 1988, now has more than 30,000 members and has established 24 chapters in Arizona.

People from the West and other such groups have been effective. They were instrumental in defeating Secretary Babbitt’s efforts to increase grazing fees on the public range. They also take credit for the ouster of reformist Jim Baca as the head of the BLM. Some leaders of People in the West suggest that environmentalists are actually socialists and communists who have been indoctrinated by arrogant university professors (Van Der Wuf and Yozwiak: July 3, 1994, pp. A4-A6).

Attacking environmentalism sell well in Arizona and this is not lost on the state’s politicians. Arizona’s Governor J. Fife Symington moved to capitalize on the strength of the conservative mood when on July 9, 1993, he proposed that the federal government should turn over some of its land and resource management responsibilities to the state. In this endeavor, the Governor enjoys considerable support from the people of Northeastern Arizona (Arizona Land Policy 2000, august 8, 1994).

Given the fact that most Arizonans live within the boundaries of the state’s major urban centers (Phoenix and Tucson), support for the Governor’s attack on the federal agencies may seem extraordinary. Arizona culture however, even in the urban areas, remains heavily influenced by a strong spirit of individualism that is a vestige of the state’s frontier heritage. In Northeastern Arizona in particular, frontier values provide the foundation upon which the social order rests (Van Otten and Davis; March, 1995).

The Region

In many ways, rural Northeastern Arizona remains an artifact of the 19th century western culture. Popular images of the West include the spectacular physical environment of colorful deserts, deep canyons, and majestic mountains. It is, however, the romantic myth of the hale and hardy cowboy, his six-gun, horse, and Stetson that stirs the public imagination. For the people of Northeastern Arizona, home remains a place for removed from the long lines and stresses of urban life. In many ways, residents of Los Angeles or Seattle have more in common with the populations of London or Berlin than someone from Snowflake, Arizona.

Currently, the rural American West is in a period a change and transition. Until recently, however, the region has been on a different path from the rest of America. It has, therefore, evolved into a place more difficult to penetrate that the “flinty” culture of New England. The primary factor that has served to isolate the people of the rural West, including Northeastern Arizona, has been the extractive nature of the economy. Around this economic system evolved a way of life rooted in traditional religions, large extended families, and small towns. Until

recently, the social solidarity of the region has remained almost undisturbed.

In the recent past, most people in Northeastern Arizona made their living directly from the land. Farming, ranching, logging, and mining have long been the primary pursuits, and, with the exception of government jobs, there have been the out-migration of the young to places where their degrees and skills can be utilized. As is also true of the Apache, Hopi and Navajo who live in Northeastern Arizona, the Anglo residents fear losing their children to the alien culture of urban America (Marston 1989: 27-32).

The Frontier Experience

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner examined the significance of the frontier on American culture. He believed that it is both the realities and the myths of the frontier that provide the historical foundation of traditional Western culture. As Americans moved west to the Rocky Mountains and beyond, they became increasingly independent of eastern society and of their European roots. At the heart of the frontier experience and its aftermath is the extreme emphasis on the importance of self-reliance and individualism. Frontier society precipitated a social organization based upon the family, intolerant of regulations and suspicious of governmental control. From life on the frontier, emerged a self/reliant people scornful of the social classes and rigidity associated with urban societies, and dedicated to the preservation of rugged individualism and personal liberty (Jackson 1894: 199 f.f.).

Nations and societies are as much a product of their myths and symbols as the momentous events of their histories. The romantic image of the noble pioneer struggling bravely against the harshness of the elements to achieve the manifest destiny of the American People has been little impacted by the fact that the land conquered already belonged to the indigenous population. The myth is important because it has served to intensify, among the non-Indian residents of Northeastern Arizona, the belief that the trials, deeds, and even blood of their ancestors earned for them the right of ownership and control of this region. As a result, there remains a deep-seated fear of planning, zoning, and environmental regulations as potential infringements upon the rights of individuals and personal freedom.

In order to fully appreciate the relatively strong implications of the frontier experience on the nature of the current values, attitudes and beliefs of the non-Indian citizens of Northeastern Arizona, it is important to recognize that Anglo pioneers did not settle in Arizona until the late 1850s. This is not ancient history. In fact, it was the grandparents of many of today's ranchers, farmers, and small/town residents who first established Anglo culture within Northeastern Arizona (Peplow 1958: 1-183).

Whereas there are only relatively small pockets of prime farmland in Northeastern Arizona, farming and ranching were among the most important economic activities of the first non-Indian settlers. Given that European and Hispanic settlement in Northeastern Arizona occurred relatively late in the 19th century when homesteaders had already claimed most of the best farm land west of the Appalachian Mountains, many choose to farm in Northeastern Arizona because little else was available.

Members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints were the largest non-indigenous group to establish farms in the region. Despite the fact that they broke away from the dominant Catholic and Protestant faiths, they strongly represented the values of Jeffersonian democracy. Even now, the people of Northeastern Arizona continue to demonstrate in their way of life, many of the philosophical tenets of the agrarian creed articulated by Thomas Jefferson nearly two centuries ago.

Farming and cultivation are no longer major economic activities in Northeastern Arizona. In 1992, only about 6,000 acres in the three counties were under cultivation. Nevertheless, the culture of the non-Native American population is firmly rooted in the rural Jeffersonian tradition.

Ranching

While Anglo culture in Northeastern Arizona remains profoundly influenced by the basic

tenets of Jeffersonian democracy, it is the life of the leather tough, stoic cowboy that defines the popular image of Western culture. Western ranchers have always focused more on solid business practices and rational economics than on the romance of the trail. For most Americans, however, and indeed for people of other nations, the cowboy remains tall in the saddle, fast on the draw, at home on the range, lean, limber, honest, respectful of women, and forever young. More than any other lifestyle, ranching symbolizes the spirit and essence of Anglo culture in Northeastern Arizona. The realities of ranch life have always been harsh. Success requires hard work, a willingness to accept isolation, even loneliness, and patience. Today, ranchers are distressed by government regulations, which they believe represent the values and interests of outsiders. Many modern ranchers believe the current Federal policies may eliminate their way of life. Seeing themselves as one of the last bastions of the American pioneer tradition, they despise the replacement of the work ethic and fierce self/reliance that once characterized American culture with the shallow materialism and self-centered greed of modern society. It is difficult for them to understand federal policies which they believe punish them for living up to the ideals of American democracy. The following quote from The Frontier Experience by Robert V. Hine and Edwin R. Bingham is almost prophetic of the dilemma of many modern ranch families even though it is intended to describe the decline of the cattle frontier in the late 19th century", … the day of the cattle frontier was short. It was brought to a close by a combination of circumstances including over stocking, fencing with barbed wire, wicked winters and protracted droughts; the introduction of blooded stock too expensive for small, independent ranches to afford; the extension of the railroads and the rise of towns and other pressures of population and progress. In addition, the invasion of large eastern and foreign investors not only contributed to overstocking and artificially high prices, but also established terms of competition that tended to drive out the small rancher. At any rate, by the late 1880s the open range was constricting or gone, the train drives intermittent, and the last roundup was just around the turn of the century. The cattle frontier was finished, an era was ended, and a kingdom lost" (Hine and Bingham 1963: 243-244).

The Mormon Tradition

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints began in 1820 when a New York farmer Joseph Smith talked with the angels. Smith was directed by Moroni, the son of the angel Mormon, to a set of gold plates mysteriously inscribed. The angle also provided Smith with two stones that made it possible for him to translate the plates into English. When smith had completed the translation, the plates were returned to heaven, but the manuscript remained and became the Book of Mormon. After the creation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1830, Mormons found themselves persecuted in the eastern states. The first group of Mormon pioneers arrived in the area near the Great Lake of Utah in the summer of 1847. Despite many trials and difficulties, by the year 1856, twenty-two thousand Mormons lived in the Great Basin of the American West. Early Mormon settlers in the rural West developed communal lifestyles in which every person shared in preserving the welfare of the community. Nevertheless, the Mormons did not want the state to own or control all means of production. Instead, they believed in hard work and free enterprise. It was central to their philosophy that each person should be industrious, hard working and self-reliant. Therefore, in similar fashion to other farming and ranching communities in the West, Mormons in general epitomized the basic tenets of the agrarian creed of Jeffersonian America (Arrington 1958: 215-217).

Mining Culture

Next to the cowboy, the miner in the foremost stereotype of the rural west. This image usually appears as a lonely prospector, his mule, and a small pack of worldly goods thrown over the mule's back. Like the farmer and the rancher, the miner is seen as highly individualistic and subject mostly to his own ideas of virtue and law.

The early miners are often looked upon as scouts of Anglo and Hispanic settlement in the West. In reality however, the prospectors were transient and had minimal impact on the

landscape. Moreover, even the more permanent mining communities often existed for only a short time. Even now, the rural West is dotted with the remains of ghost towns which stand as vestiges of an earlier time when fortunes were made during the boom and lost as quickly when the mines were no longer producing.

Mining in the West became a major pursuit after 1848 when gold was discovered in California. By 1849, one hundred thousand people from all over the world had come to the West in search of gold. In 1880, there were about 4,600 miners scattered throughout Arizona. During the last years of the 19th century mining activities became less individualistic as mining companies began to establish commercial operations. In Northeastern Arizona, mining towns such as Globe and Miami emerged almost overnight. The size and fortunes of these communities tended to ebb and flow in response to the price of copper and the prosperity of the cooper mining industry in Arizona. During the 1930s, for example, when the price of cooper dropped, Gila County lost 23 percent of its population (Greeley 1987: 13-29).

Unlike the ranching and farming cultures of the rural West which strongly reflect the frontier experience, the primary transcendent theme of the culture of Arizona's mining communities is their characteristic ethnic diversity. The multicultural nature of these communities (which include residents of Anglo, Asian, Hispanic, African and Native American origins) not withstanding, miners and their families do not support governmental interventions that might adversely impact upon the future of the mining enterprise in the region (Eppinger 1987). Thus, despite considerable differences in backgrounds and cultures, miners, farmers, and ranchers are united in their efforts to diminish the role of the federal agencies in regulating activities upon which their livelihoods depend.

Logging and Timber

Like the culture of the farmers and ranchers, the way of life of loggers and others who live and work in the forests of Northeastern Arizona is rooted in the traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Other than perhaps the development of cities, the clearing of the vast North American forest was the most important factor in the creation of the modern American landscape. During the 18th and 19th centuries, trees were looked upon as a resource and a challenge. Timbered land could not be farmed and the northern two-thirds of the United States could not have been occupied in the winter without wood for fuel. Wood was also the primary natural resource for building houses, fences, ships, and even roads.

American in the 18th, 19th and even early 20th centuries believed that there was an inexhaustible supply of trees. As a result, it was considered proper to clear the land of trees as quickly as possible. In general, the clearing of the forests was a response to the need to create farms, settle the land, and supply wood for fuel and the construction of new towns and industries (Williams 1990: 146-168).

Many early pioneers in the West were both farmers and ranchers and loggers. It was not uncommon for a man to farm his land or tend his herd and also work in a lumber mill during the winter (Cline: 1995).

In the earliest years of Anglo settlement in Northeastern Arizona, the primary impacts of human occupancy resulted from the clearing of trees in order to establish farms. Unlike other places in the nation, clearing the land of trees did not involved large tracts of land. This however changed with the introduction of large-scale logging equipment. Power saws, rail lines, motorized vehicles, and state-of-the-art mills made it possible to clear large areas (Williams 1990: 146-168). While these technologies have made it possible to cut more timber in a short period of time, the fact that the United States Forest Service and the Indian nations control much of the timber resources in Northeastern Arizona has significantly slowed the rate of harvest.

While only a small number of people in Northeastern Arizona make their livings directly from timber harvesting and processing, regulations which cause reductions in the timber cutting are of major concern to county leaders. Currently, there are only six operational lumber mills in Northeastern Arizona. When decisions by the Forest Service and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service have stopped timber harvests in the national forests, lumber mills and related activities have been forced to close. Community leaders and lumbermen throughout

Northeastern Arizona contend that the policies of the federal government are unnecessarily restrictive and that the federal agencies are putting the rights of wild animals ahead of the needs of people. Many loggers believe that government regulations will soon end their way of life and wonder why people from other parts of the United States sympathize with the efforts of local Native American communities to protect their cultures, but do not seem to care whether or not the rural Anglo culture of the region is destroyed. The ranchers, farmers, and miners of this part of the West seem to feel that they are forgotten people.

The Native American Population

Approximately half of the people of Northeastern Arizona are members of the Hopi, Navajo and Apache Nations. Despite the size of the Native American population, interaction between Indians and non-Indians at more than relatively impersonal levels is rare. In Apache County, non-Indian residents have often called for the creation of a new county which will not include lands within the Navajo or Apache reservations. Many non-Indians believe that their taxes support Native Americans while Navajo and Apache people who live on reservations do not pay state income or local property taxes. Thus, differences between the Native American and non-Indian communities center more around local economic issues than serious conflicts between the various cultures involved.

While it is inappropriate to suggest that the relationship between the Indian and non-Indian populations are severely strained, it is reasonable to suggest that most Native Americans in the region do not share the non-Indian enthusiasm for the state of Arizona taking over management of federal lands and resources. Moreover, it is clear that the Native American community does not support the desire of many Anglos in the region to sell the public lands. At the same time, Native Americans, like their Anglo counterparts, do not like outsiders making decisions about the ways in which they can live and how they manage local resources. Furthermore, both Native American and non-Indian residents of the region share at least a century of common history and a degree of understanding of one another's goals, aspirations, and lifestyles. Thus, whereas, the non-Indian community cannot count on the Native American nations to fully support them in their quest to reduce federal influences in the region, they can expect Indian support for at least some of their efforts to battle the power of the federal government.

Conclusions

In many ways the ranchers, farmers, loggers, and miners of Northeastern Arizona, like their Native American neighbors, represent the culture of 19th century frontier America. They know that only a few of the next generation will be able to participate in farming, ranching, and logging as a way of life. Many blame this reality on the policies of the federal government. Though they are now dependent primarily upon the service sector of the economy and government spending in their region to provide jobs, they remain philosophically and emotionally tied to the rural values and lifestyles on an earlier time. As a result, the people of Northeastern Arizona feel increasingly threatened by the relentless encroachments of modern American society on their values, attitudes, and traditions. The power of federal agencies to regulate activities on local public land and resources, in the eyes of many who reside in Apache, Navajo, and Gila County, represents outside interference. To them, it does nor seem reasonable that people who live in another part of the nation should be able to exercise any authority over what happens in Northeastern Arizona.

While on the surface, the people of Northeastern Arizona appear to be strongly committed to the diminishment of the role of the federal government in their region, they are not reluctant to accept federal jobs, grants, and other support. Their discontent with the policies and decisions of various federal agencies is real. However, the intensity of their anti-federal rhetoric is fueled by their disgust with, and fear of the dominance of modern urban American culture. To people in the rural West, the federal government has come to symbolize urban values and the disintegration of the frontier ethic. Since they are unable to directly confront the dominant urban

culture, they turn their wrath toward the federal government which they believe is representative of values that will soon eliminate their society.

Ranchers, loggers, farmers and miners as well as the Native American communities share in the concern that outsiders will soon destroy their cultures and their ways of life. Many fear that their ranches, farms, and small towns will be sacrificed in the name of environmental protection and that their children will be forced to live in America's violent and chaotic urban centers. For the people of Northeastern Arizona, the current fight with the federal government represents a last stand for the preservation of the traditional values of rural America. In their frame of reference, they are not fighting merely for political advantage but for their existence as a people and a culture.

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