

The American Frontier: A Pulitzer Prize Centennial Series

Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911) came to the United States in 1864. Born at Mako, Hungary, he possessed no knowledge of the English language and no money. He enlisted in a German regiment of the U.S. Cavalry and served in the Union Army until the end of the Civil War. In 1865, he made his way to St. Louis. There he worked as a stevedore, steamboat fireman, grave digger, and learned English. He then became a reporter for the German language newspaper *Westliche Post*, where he gained a reputation for accurate, factual reporting and unlimited energy. In 1878, he purchased at auction the *St. Louis Dispatch* and merged with the *St. Louis Post*. The *Post-Dispatch*, made Pulitzer a major force in providing news, opinion, and other information in Missouri. An unwavering Democrat, he used the paper to promote Democratic policies, support labor unions, investigate corruption, and castigate the rich. He introduced comic strips, sports, and fashion pages to his readers. In addition, he studied law, passed the bar examination, and served as a member of the Missouri legislature and the state constitutional convention.

In 1883, Pulitzer moved to New York City when he purchased the nearly bankrupt *New York World*. He worked feverishly to turn it into a successful major metropolitan publication. During the era of the Spanish American War, Pulitzer's newspapers engaged in a circulation contest with William Randolph Hearst, the nation's other newspaper magnate. They both unsparingly used "Yellow Journalism"—sensationalizing the news—to attract readers. After the war, his sons returned their papers to more professional reporting. Because of failing eyesight, Pulitzer retired from the newspaper business in 1890 and became involved in philanthropic ventures. In 1902, he gave \$2,000,000 to Columbia University to establish a school of journalism. Joseph Pulitzer died of heart failure at Charleston, South Carolina, on October 29, 1911. His donation to Columbia University led to the Pulitzer Prize, cash awards to superlative authors in numerous literary fields. Judges awarded the first Pulitzer prizes in 1917. Each of the books in this series either received the Pulitzer Prize or emerged as a finalist for the award.

About the time Joseph Pulitzer retired from active management of his newspapers, Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), a young historian at the University of Wisconsin, offered a new interpretation of American History: The Frontier Hypothesis. In 1893, he presented a paper at a professional conference which he later published entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He asserted the single most important feature of American national development was the westward movement of Anglo-

American civilization from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Turner believed this “Frontier” or “Wilderness Experience” produced uniquely American characteristics because settlers constantly rebuilt their institutions as they moved west, each time reducing the influence of their European background. These special features included a dominant land-owning middle class, a tolerance for religious freedom, a mixed population of various ethnic groups, an innovative and inventive people, an unswerving commitment to democracy, a conspicuously wasteful use of natural resources, and an uncultured society. Turner also believed the historical record must be interdisciplinary: weather, climate, economics, geography, geology, politics as well as documents were crucial to explaining the story. Prior to Turner’s Frontier Hypothesis, historians regarded American development as guided by the unaltered transfer of institutions from Western Europe.

The five books in this series deal with the American Frontier. Although some authors do not embrace all of the Frontier Hypothesis, readers should be able to detect some of Turner’s ideas in the pages of these works. Each of them deals with a significant element of settling the region west of the Appalachian Mountains. Each of the books describes a time period crucial to expansion, and all of the narratives include the role of the individual in this process. European government agents, U. S. officials, backwoods settlers, tribal leaders, women both Indian and non-Indian, emigrants, speculators, and a cavalcade of well-known as well as not-so-well-known characters portray their experience on the frontier.

The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815
by Richard White

In 1992, this book became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in history. Richard White offers an alternative to the traditional interpretations of Fredrick Jackson Turner known as the “The New Western History.” His purpose is to examine Indian/white relations within the context of accommodation and common purpose rather than conquest and assimilation. The Middle Ground, or *pays d’en haut* as the French knew it, was both a physical place and a region of colliding cultures. Located between the Allegheny River in the east, the Mississippi River in the west, and the Ohio River to the south, this vast region included many tribes of Indians. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the French arrived. They came to trade and worked to cultivate the friendship or at least an economic partnership with the natives. This process involved an accommodation or middle ground where both groups either absorbed or tried to understand the cultural, diplomatic, economic, political, and social institutions of each other. In the late 1700s the British acquired the region. They, too, soon learned of the necessity of accommodation when dealing with these tribes. The advent of aggressive

American backwoods settlers late in the eighteenth century brought a violent and destructive contest for the land, ending the existence of a Middle Ground. Personal relationships in the wilderness of the Middle Ground underpinned events of this era.

Across the Wide Missouri
by Bernard DeVoto

In 1948, Bernard DeVoto received the Pulitzer Prize for history for this book. Born in Utah and trained as a journalist, DeVoto wrote many books about the American West, each of them designed for the educated middle class, not professional historians. This book provides a comprehensive history of the Rocky Mountain fur trade between 1832-1839. Events take place during the most important period of the mountain man and fur trader. He includes examinations of the fur companies and their activities, fur trappers and their life style, fur traders and their method of doing business, as well as American Indian culture and their interaction with Anglo-Americans. He inserts the impact of geography, weather, and politics into the era. Aside from trappers and traders, DeVoto offers portraits of the different people who encountered the fur trade, including American Indian men and women, explorers, adventurers, European nobility, and the curious. Face-to-face relationships and confrontations in the wilderness characterized events of the Rocky Mountain fur trade.

The Way West
by A. B. Guthrie

A 1950 Pulitzer Prize awardee for fiction, *The Way West* chronicles the lives of a group of emigrants traveling the Oregon Trail in 1846. Dick Summers, chosen as pilot, is a former mountain man who reminisces about a frontier life that no longer exists, before the decimation of beaver and the silencing of the Rendezvous fur-trading fair. Lije Evans is a poster child for Manifest Destiny, a belief that the United States was ordained to spread from ocean to ocean. Just as his father had fought the British, he determines to help settle Oregon Territory with Americans to deny the English their claim in the Northwest. Their fellow travelers making the difficult trip are as varied as their reasons for heading to the new frontier: an opportunity to rise to political importance, the chance to be “first come, best served” in business as well as profits, and the hope of saving a child’s life. The author’s intent is not to recount all the perils of the journey although he details them all including Indian encounters, river crossings, disease, and stampeding buffalo. Rather, the tale is of strangers, bound together to face triumphs and disasters in their determination to make their way west.

Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir
by Linnie Marsh Wolfe

In 1945, Linne Marsh Wolfe received the Pulitzer Prize posthumously for biography for this book. A librarian and archivist by training, Wolfe became engaged in the life of John Muir while cataloging his papers. She met members of his immediate family, and they urged her to write this book. The book spans the period 1825-1914. Marsh offers a comprehensive examination of the life of the well-known preservationist. Her purpose is to deflate the myths surrounding his life, place him in historical context, reveal his personal life and family relationships, as well as examine the political and cultural arena in which he operated. From an early age Muir found solace in the wilderness and recognized the redeeming aspects of seeing nature unmolested by “progress”. His determination to protect the wonders of nature focused on the Yosemite Valley, but his work produced national ramifications. How an individual can make a difference and the preservation of the wilderness are a crucial part of this story.

The Son
by Philipp Meyer

The Texas frontier entwines with the saga of the McCullough family in Philipp Meyer’s 2014 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, *The Son*. Eli, family patriarch born in the newly formed Texas Republic, recounts at age 100 his life for a WPA recording. His frontier includes Comanches who hold him captive from the age of thirteen to sixteen. After readjusting to civilized society, Eli fights for the Confederacy, and helps tame southwest Texas, first as rancher and then oilman while defining his world by encounters with Mexicans and Tejanos. Son Peter’s diaries dating from 1915 to 1917 provide the second voice for the McCullough chronicles. He wants those around him to move toward a civilized society, accepting other cultures, and no longer a place where men live and die by the gun. Peter becomes the family outcast. Peter’s granddaughter, Jeanne, mentally recounts her life as she lies on the floor dying – but why? Her frontier is the man’s world, where she strives for and achieves recognition as an oil tycoon. The fourth voice, and last chapter, brings the saga full circle. Although each member of the McCullough family faces different frontiers and struggles, they serve as reminders of the challenges confronted by everyone in everyday life.

For further reading:

Each of the books listed below received the Pulitzer Prize or judges designated as a finalist for the award. The date following the citation is the year of the award.

Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People by Elizabeth A. Fenn (History, 2105)

Empires, Nations and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860 by Anne F. Hyde (History Finalist, 2012).

Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of America by Daniel K. Richter (History Finalist, 2002)

Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution by Bernard Bailyn (History, 1987)

The Plains Across by John B. Unruh (History Finalist, 1980)

Exploration and Empire: The Frontier and the Scientist in the Winning of the West by William H. Goetzmann (History, 1967)

The Significance of Sections in American History by Frederick Jackson Turner (History, 1933)

History of the American Frontier by Frederic L Paxon (History, 1924)

Close Range: Wyoming Stories by Anne Proulx (Fiction Finalist, 2000)

Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry (Fiction, 1986)

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner (Fiction, 1972)

House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday (Fiction, 1969)

The Town by Conrad Richter (Fiction, 1951)

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck (Fiction, 1940)

Laughing Boy by Oliver Lafarge (Fiction, 1930)

One of Ours by Willa Cather (Fiction, 1923)

Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of the Birds of North America by William Souder (Biography Finalist, 2005)

The Raven by Marquis James (Biography, 1930)

Daughter of the Middle Border by Hamlin Garland (Biography, 1922)

Empire of the Silver Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches by S.C. Gwynn (General Non-Fiction Finalist, 2011)

Where the Buffalo Roam by Anne Matthews (General Non-Fiction Finalist, 1993)

Credits

This program is part of the Pulitzer Prizes Centennial Campfires Initiative, a joint venture of the Pulitzer Prizes Board and the Federation of State Humanities Councils in celebration of the 2016 centennial of the Prizes. The initiative seeks to illuminate the impact of journalism and the humanities on American life today, to imagine their future and to inspire new generations to consider the values represented by the body of Pulitzer Prize-winning work.

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This theme was developed by Bill Corbett. Bill is a native of Clarion, PA, received his B.S. degree from Clarion State College, M.A. from the University of South Dakota, and Ph.D. in American History from Oklahoma State University. In 1980, he joined the faculty of Northern Oklahoma College, Tonkawa and, in 1988, moved to Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK. His areas of interest are American Indians, The West, and state and local history. A member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society since 1994, he served a term as president of the board. He has published one book, twelve journal articles, numerous book reviews, was consulting editor to the *Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, and presented more than 300 public programs about Oklahoma and regional history. In 2012, he received the Public Humanities Award from Oklahoma Humanities and, in 2014, was inducted into the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame.



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