



AGAINST THE WIND

Life in Small Town Colorado

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its black letters proclaiming: 'Watch Nunn Grow'..."

BY ERIN HART

The car door slammed against my legs; a forgotten companion rose to greet me. The fierce prairie wind whipped dust into my eyes and mouth, its grit a true reminder: I was back home on the dryland after an absence of eighteen years.

The first sight of my hometown was like a mirage. Eyes strained through the ripples of sunlight mirrored down the licorice stick of Highway 85. The silver water tower loomed into focus, its black letters proclaimed: "Watch Nunn Grow."

Erin Hart, a child of dryland, is a free-lance writer who grew up in Nunn, Colorado.

Photographer, writer, and historian Robert Adams has exhibited his work in New York City, Los Angeles, England, and Germany. Adams, a Longmont resident who presently focuses on broad landscapes from Colorado to California, was last represented in Denver in 1978 with "Prairie," a collection of his photographs on the Colorado Plains sponsored by the Denver Art Museum.

"I see the water tower," I whispered, echoing the refrain of the child from the small farm town north of Greeley. Mark of progress: the tower is now denoted by a "Point of Interest" sign near the grain elevators once owned by my grandfather, L. I. Hart, whose tough honesty, love for Nunn, and ability to turn wheat to gold is still revered among residents.

That manmade concession to the semiarid climate was Lou Hart's last stand as mayor of Nunn. In the Depression, the townspeople rebelled against his refusal to approve the expenditure of \$25 to repaint the faded sign. He considered it prodigal, and for two years withstood protests in favor of rekindling the symbol of the prairie town's dream. Petitions circulated calling for his impeachment. Undaunted, he decided he could do without being the town's leader and resigned.

I parked the car beside the dark green house of Iva Lewis, who had helped my mother adjust to the harsh climate she found so discordant to her own



Southern seascape. "Wouldn't you know it, Erin. The wind would kick up right before you arrive!" Wind, rain, land, the weather. Nature is the chief topic of conversation in small towns in Colorado and around the world, I suspect. Complaining about it runs a close second. For people of the country, nature permeates life and that fact is reflected in how they look at all happenings. Disasters in my family are referred to in climatic terms: "How many hailstorms did you suffer this week?"

Those of us who choose to live in cities have an arrogant attitude toward the weather and do our best to avoid rather than adapt to its changes. We resort to humidifiers, heaters, and air conditioning; we even have the temerity to demand that the weather be suited to our taste.

In the country, stoicism and the survival instinct run strong. There is still a fundamental trust in Colorado's motto: "Nothing without Providence." An editorial in a special edition of the *Weld County News*, dated November, 1921, still applies: "What has been accomplished on the non-irrigated areas of the country is no less than miraculous, but the miracle consists in changing of the mind rather than changing of the climate. When man was made to understand that he had to farm with what moisture Providence sent instead of praying for more, the problem was not a problem anymore."

But country people, too, adapt, albeit with some resistance.

"You can't get a hired man to even climb into a combine unless it is air conditioned and has a stereo," grumbles Oscar Barnes, dryland veteran of Nunn. Stinging comments are common in the general stores of towns I visited: Nunn, Dailey, Hesperus, and Genoa. Afternoon is the best time to listen as farmers and townspeople take a rest from the endless chores connected to dealing with nature on her own terms. Suspicion of a young woman carrying a notebook runs high until I state I am from Nunn and working for a magazine, not the Census Bureau or the IRS. It is then that weather complaints move on to manmade storms of controversy like growth, loss of identity, irrigation, government intervention, corporation farming, and the lack of jobs for the young who want to stay rather than move on. Opinions are always staked with an "I believe" or "According to what I know," in keeping with rural self-assurance.

Roughly four out of five Coloradans prefer to live in a city and are clustered along the eastern plains in Denver/Boulder, Pueblo, Fort Collins, Colorado Springs, and Greeley—evidence that manufacturing long ago replaced agriculture as

the state's leader in economy. Mining, the siren that beckoned the first mass of white settlers to Colorado in the 1850s, is third. Most of the small towns grew up beside pony express and railroad routes. Highways where most of the produce of the plains is now carried are the arterial lifelines of these towns.

Water is still the predominant issue to rural Coloradans, but today it is also the complexities of the economy that frustrate the farmer. Fuel and equipment, the dual harbinger of better yields and efficient production, is now threatening to many farmers, especially the small ones. "Lean on my tractor, it won't cost you anything," eighty-five-year-old Barnes says. A jovial man who likes to pretend he is crotchety, Barnes has remained on the land homesteaded by his parents "because we were too poor to move."

Alice Bellmore, the wife of Slim, a former marshall of Nunn, agrees with what Barnes doesn't quite say: "You know my second love is this old dryland. Iva here is the one who will get to heaven and I'm the one who is going to come back to Nunn."

"Elbow room" is only a reason for staying, even though Barnes is a bit disgruntled by the new people who commute to Greeley, Windsor, and Fort Collins to work. For Nunn has grown. Trailer houses have sprouted up like weeds. "I don't know everyone in town anymore. There are thirty-odd new houses. But we don't know who moved in," Alice says. "We used to know everyone and all their business, too."

Mary Magee is one of the newcomers who does get involved. "We love it, this is what we wanted—two houses, a barn, a pasture. I like the schools. The kids are really doing well. The setup is safer for children, a better atmosphere."

Some farmers still rely on the rising value of land. "We could always sell a quarter section and bail out," Barnes reflects.

Tenant farmers who till rented land and give one third of the crop to the owner, must clear "at least seventeen bushels an acre" and work at other jobs to make ends meet, Alice Bellmore tells me. Her son, Leroy, the only one among three to continue wheat farming in Nunn, also works in "aerial application," dusting crops grown in the area.

In these days of the energy crisis, even Grandlouie's solution for evading creditors wouldn't work. When the land was a dust bowl, he used to borrow enough gas for his pickup, park in the ditch, and read.

Nunn grew up alongside the railroad route from Denver to Cheyenne and was founded by land speculators in 1908. The streets once sported banks, hardware stores, and even a milliner's shop. Today, two restaurants, a beauty



parlor, and a market are all that comprise Nunn's business district. For years the water tower's slogan was the butt of jokes because population hovered at 200. Today with 350 people, the town is "booming", but its feeling has flown.

Country-western tunes by Emmy Lou Harris and Dolly Parton are interspersed with agricultural reports on Sterling's radio station, picked up on the way down I-76, destination Northeast Colorado. A stop at the Wayward Wind Cafe outside Fort Morgan brought communion with delectable cinnamon rolls baked by a woman named Irene and a chat with waitress Janna Steinbeck. She is 19 and just married a roughneck, 22. "He is *sooo* handsome—wanna see his picture?" Riding from her home in Fort Morgan to the diner on a motorcycle and raising Arabian horses suits Janna fine. I leave, grateful that while I can be moved by the sight of the rich soil woven with buffalo grass, I will step on city asphalt tonight.

Highway 6, east of Sterling, is a lonely road. Phillips County is the only one in Colorado where there is no mineral production; not a single oil derrick dips toward the earth. A windmill or a cottonwood is the only vertical relief on the landscape.

The signpost "Wind Likely Next Mile" is a typical country understatement.

Dailey resembles an abandoned movie set of a ghost town. The Dailey Cash Store General Merchandise and U.S. Post Office, set off the dirt road parallel to the railroad tracks, is deserted in spite of a new coat of paint. Clabber Girl Baking Powder and Lipton's Tea advertisements stare out from cobwebbed windows.

The arrival of a grain truck startles me out of humming the theme from the "Twilight Zone." Dailey is indeed inhabited. Counting townspeople on her fingers, Mary Lambert, who runs the Cooperative Feed Co., comes up with the figure twenty. Mrs. Lambert is one of two entrepreneurs left in town. The other is husband Dwayne, who owns an electronics shop. Former operators of a gasoline station in Denver, the Lamberts returned some years ago "because it is home."

The grain elevator office, which doubles as a mini-general store, is stocked with candy, pop, and coffee (as well as rat poison and paint) and serves as the local hangout. Homegrown homilies prevail: "A human being is the only animal I know that can be skinned twice." "In those days, I was paid one cent for a bushel of corn, worked all seven, and had to pay for my own gloves. Then you worked, by golly." Tales of weasels who drink blood, pet ducks who drowned, and a man whose buttocks were singed by lightning pass the time.

There aren't many minorities in this area and the recent arrival of a Vietnamese family draws comments. Moved onto a farm by a church group, the family eventually wound up in Sterling on welfare. "If they have a chance they should stick

with it and make it work or go back. Groups shouldn't be dumped on our society."

Television, Mrs. Lambert thinks, has isolated people in farm communities and is partially responsible for the decline of group celebrations like potlucks, picnics, and dances. "About the only time people get together and talk is here at the elevator," she said.

When the elevator empties out, bookkeeper Jeanette Loos and Mrs. Lambert discuss women's liberation on request. The descendants of pioneer women still work out of economic necessity rather than conviction. "In farm communities there never has been much [women's liberation]. Men figure there's so much work that if a woman can do it, let her do it," Mrs. Loos said. She estimates that 90 percent of the women around nearby Fleming work. Women now man the road crews, highway and rail.

Mrs. Lambert, who had to insist on equal pay and temporarily lost a few male customers when she first took over the elevator, thinks, "Everyone is different. If a woman wants to be head of the household, she can." Big cities are not for either woman. Mrs. Lambert worries about the lack of exposure for the youth, Mrs. Loos seems content. The latter says she even feels "claustrophobic in the mountains."

The towering Sangre de Cristo and San Juan mountains in the south and west are sacred to the Indians. Wolf Creek Pass (the way to the Western Slope in Southwestern Colorado) in winter is still a formidable natural barrier. West of Durango, the white men of Hesperus complain about changes wrought by their own people in sentences laden with profanity. "Don't Tread on Me" is an appropriate sign for the people in Hesperus, where antipathy for government—county, state, and federal—runs as deep as coal and gold veins in Four Corners. The federal government owns roughly one third of the state and 63 percent of La Plata County, which runs Hesperus because it is an unincorporated town. Jokes are made about seceding from Colorado and joining New Mexico.

One resident, whose stance against the feds made headlines in the midseventies, is Violet Smith, formerly co-owner of the King Coal Mine, now run by a large outfit based in Denver and Wyoming. A feisty woman who fought the Mine Safety Act, Mrs. Smith, 75, still has plenty of barbed wire in her tongue.



"Remove all those rules and regulations and let people work. Let the individual back in, let us live. Damned welfare can't solve nothing. Got to get out and whip 'em," she all but

shouted when I visited her ramshackle home in the middle of the coal mine.

At Earl and Retha's Shalako Store, Jim Milton sips endless cups of coffee and vents his spleen on recent land control legislation, the Animas-La Plata water project, all of which "is a waste of money nationwide. Denverites are paying for it, too." Half-joking, he envisions a return "to the day of the 45" when he will plant himself in the middle of his ranch "and survivors will be prosecuted" for trespassing. Later, more seriously, he reflects, "I don't care for revolution, maybe a quiet revolution, though. If the representatives hear us, fine. Nobody will get stepped on. Nobody will get killed as long as we get back to the day when an individual is an individual." Softly, he quotes the Declaration of Independence: "We declare to have suffered a long train of abuses...."

Milton admits being "meetinged out," but Jack Scott, a younger rancher from Aztec, is still trying to organize. In April he spearheaded an attempt to get local ranchers and farmers to fight a proposed multipurpose fuel pipeline, claiming the company "only plans to pay \$5 a rod, or less than \$200 an acre for land rights." Scott holds that "most times, we aren't even contacted about [plans] and don't find out about them until it's too late."

The next day a mention of the family inheritance tax sends Bob Clark into a diatribe against interference. "It will cost us \$75,000 to hold onto our ranch [of 4,600 acres] after grandfather dies." His love for privacy and his land runs deep: "My grandmother and uncle were buried out on the farm. You think I'm going to leave this place? The only thing that will run me out of here will be if I can't make a living."

The farmers' ride on Washington "did us an injustice. Riding to complain about bad prices in an air-conditioned truck. Yet it was the strongest protest, closest thing to union we've had. We are hurtin' and that's a known fact. But we're the world's worst follow-the-leader."

Linda Day, a housewife whose tradesman husband had a devil of a time finding work in the Durango area, claims "the county is against industrial progress. Tourism is all they care about." Because of ski and resort development, prices are so high in Durango that most of Hesperus drives down to New Mexico to shop, residents say.

Pauline Grossman, who with husband Herman owns a

trailer park, is glum. "We voice opinions but we don't do anything about them. We just sit here and have another cup of coffee." Karyn Buckey, 25, is also worried about the future of

Hesperus. A member of the Starlight community, still referred to as "that hippie colony" by older residents, Ms. Buckey teaches at the Animas Free School and is from Albuquerque. She doesn't mind "people who want to come to the country," but "those who bring the city with them."

Her greatest fear is that the encroaching modern problems will destroy times in the general store "where you get to know the old-timers and can teach them who you are." Rapes along Highway 160 have increased and child abuse is a problem in Durango, Karyn says. The school where she teaches is moving to Mancos "because they don't have enough space." She is warned by locals to lay in a year's food supply to guard against serious economic upheaval. "People are surviving by panicking," she sighs.

The loud colors of the Genoa Tower ("Highest point on the eastern plains") shock the eye lulled by the green and beige buffalo- and grama-grass carpeted hills. From the tower east of Limon on I-70 you can see six states: Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico. The fifty-cent tour and treasures like 20,000 arrowheads, eight-legged pigs, and two-headed calves make Jerry Chubbuck's tower a monument to small-town eccentricity at its best.

Down at the Cottage Cafe, the town kids, including Chubbuck's fifteen-year-old son Alan, eat pizza and share their thoughts on economics, government, farming, and women's lib. Too much fuss over women's lib, the government is hiding information, there really isn't an energy crisis, farmers' sons are cocky in their new cars. The draft does interest them. Mark Hansen, 17, and Greg Ashmore, 16, agree Canada is an option. Debbie Engle, 13, says, "I'd go if I could stay in an office, but if it means killing somebody, forget it."

The high school population numbers twenty-nine. For excitement, there are keggers in the town dump, movies in Arriba and Limon. They think they have it better than city kids because they get more attention in school.

Back in Nunn, thinking of the town kids, I am saddened as I stare down the dirt block where I used to lug library books to the bookmobile. From that gravel I saw four tornadoes once. City friends are skeptical about the savage power of tornadoes, but the folks on the windy dryland believe. ■