

AN OPEN SPACE OF ONE'S OWN

By Rosemary Carstens

Back when Pluto was a planet and the moon was made of cheese, I had a very early sense of myself as a Westerner. That is, as a person born and made in the American West (see photo). I felt a perfect understanding of what love was all about when I saw Roy Rogers kiss Trigger during a Saturday matinee. I didn't feel that was weird; I felt a kinship—he was of the West and so was I. And we both loved Trigger with an almost unseemly passion—but then, horses were a defining feature of the legendary old West.

I grew up in a tiny farming community in southern California in the fifties. In our town, the crop was potatoes, and the harvest was owned by two or three major farmers. In the western tradition, they called themselves “ranchers,” although their livestock generally amounted to a dozen yard chickens and a couple of beeves raised for the table. As teens, we had two main choices of places to work: potatoes or food. The best pay was in the spuds—picking, sorting, or cutting all the eyes out of potatoes for the next planting (this was “women’s work”), or, if you were a healthy young man wanting to build muscle over the summer, you filled huge bags as potatoes bounced and rolled off the conveyor belts and hefted them onto trucks. Winters were marked with cold, socked-in foggy mornings and evenings, and summers were hot and dry, no smog in sight, with vast blue skies that seemed to go on forever and the smell of fresh-mown alfalfa on the air. There was plenty of space (no one referred to it redundantly as “open space” yet) where folks could hunt, fish, look for arrowheads, or picnic. Most people were plenty busy making a living and didn't call walking around on the land “hiking”—you always had a greater purpose. And no one wore special shoes for it, either.

I thought most families were like mine. Fathers worked hard and brought their paychecks home to full time homemakers who baked regularly, sewed clothes, and got their laundry out on the line on Monday mornings before 7 a.m. We ate lunch and dinner, not supper, and everyone drank milk. The idea of cocktails or wine at meals never came up. Friday night was high school football; most Saturdays, kids went to the afternoon matinee, Sundays was church. Without it ever being spoken of, there was a sense of physical attachment to the land. If we thought of Easterners at all, which I'm not sure we did, we envisioned them in big cities, all thought and no go. Now and then my dad would joke that “those folks” didn't even know where their milk came from.

Later in life, it began to soak in that people who grew up in the “East” often looked at things differently than I did. I began to believe our wide open skies and vast expanses of land, unbroken by living too closely together, had an effect on our ways of thinking. That we might be more open to possibility than those in the East. Since its mythic early settlement days, West has been the direction of opportunity, of change, of adventure. The compass point quivered with anticipation when it pointed toward the Pacific. All things might be possible if you left the conventions of the East, the tightly packed expectations of culture and family behind. You could reinvent yourself, escape the old,

familiar frame. You could spread out, loosen your belt, wear white shoes after Labor Day, try out some new ideas, seek your fortune, raise whoopee.

I'm a confirmed Western woman. I'm not at home if the sky isn't big. I have to live where I define my direction by geographical features to the west—the ocean when I lived in California and the Rockies here in Colorado. I'm headed north if they're on my left and south if on my right. I know where I am, if not where I'll end up. I like dramatic landscapes—even if they seem flat and rolling, it's that they run as far as the eye can see and they're not all boogered up with concrete and steel high rises. When I'm in the East, I feel smaller, more compressed; there seems less possibility, like someone else has already done everything—named all the destinations, defined all the journeys. The trees grow so close together they become a stockade; they hulk over you in places—suffocating green tunnels that hold you pinned to the road, cutting off your view of the heavens. Every inch of ground holds someone else's footprint.

In the West, each dusty old road still seems to promise an unexpected bend, a choice not a foregone conclusion. As writers, I think the geography shapes our words. Women and men writing the west seem more optimistic, more able to soar. Our thoughts can ride side saddle, western, or hell-bent bareback across the plains. They don't perspire, our words sweat. European traditions don't mean much to us—we mold them to fit our own lives rather than molding ourselves to them.

I wonder if, for each of us, there is a place, or a sense of place, that trumps all others. Virginia Woolf wanted a room of her own. She grew up in tradition-bound England. Me? I need a wide open space of my own.

©2006 Rosemary Carstens