

BACK TO THE FRONTIER



Michael J. Gallegos/Tribune

Perhaps exemplifying the myth of frontier in the Old West — which today's author says still exists in the many frontier communities of today's West — actor and stunt man Al Canlu worked last summer on rounding up a stray horse roaming a location set on the J.W. Eaves Movie Ranch near Santa Fe.

The frontier is still out there, enduring beyond the Western myth but with a still tough and stark reality. It starts, today's author says, with the 9 million people still eking out a living there.

By Carol Miller

Buried deep in the American consciousness is the idea of an American frontier; wild and loved by some, loathed and needing to be tamed by others.

Beginning with the first storytelling versions taught in elementary school, every student learns the fundamental myths and concepts.

Myths blur with facts: Manifest Destiny; movies showing gunslingers and the occasional American Indian; and Frederick Jackson Turner.

Turner, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin, made a speech in 1893 declaring after the 1890 census that the frontier was gone — after which it evaporated from the national consciousness.

But guess what? It's still there.

Separating myths from facts, we now recognize the rich diversity of native peoples, languages and cultures, the wildlife, and natural history of this continent — before it was conquered and colonized and before indigenous people, who had lived in that "frontier" for centuries, were nearly eliminated.

This is the hidden region in the United States, the enduring American frontier, a term as volatile as the myths that still surround it. The center seeks to be a voice for the unique character of these places in the hope of sustaining and preserving them.

Using the center's consensus definition, this region is 56 percent of the land area, yet it contains fewer than 4 percent of the population of the United States. These areas share only a sparse population and an isolation of more than an hour's travel time from the cities, suburbs and small towns — where the remaining 96 percent of Americans live.

While Turner used only population density to describe frontier, the center's consensus definition takes modern life into account. It uses a matrix that weights population density

TODAY'S BYLINE

Miller is the founder and executive director of the Frontier Education Center and the National Clearinghouse for Frontier Communities in Santa Fe.

She lives in the Northern New Mexico mountain village of Ojo Sarco, which she considers the frontier town.

TAP IN

To learn more about Frontier Communities on the Internet, go to: www.frontierus.org. Disagree? Have another view on this topic? The Tribune welcomes differing opinions. Please write us at: Letters to the editor, The Albuquerque Tribune, P.O. Drawer T, Albuquerque, NM 87103. Fax us at 823-3689. E-mail us at: letters@abqtrib.com.

with travel time and distance to services or a market center as more accurate and contemporary frontier.

The center was inspired by Rutgers University land-use professor Frank Popper — who spoke about these issues last year at the University of New Mexico. His academic articles revealed that although a frontier line no longer exists, huge tracts of the country still are very sparsely populated and are losing people.

His work got noticed and appeared in the popular media. One article caught the eye of a community health clinic director in Mullen, Neb., the heart of the barely populated Sand Hills region. He and the people in Mullen knew they faced unique barriers in struggling to maintain a health care system. They sought changes in federal policy.

Mullen's Hooker County today has a population of only 783, a density of just one person per square mile.

Their efforts led to what became the Frontier Healthcare Task Force. By 1986, the federal government, the American Public Health Association and the National Rural Health Association all had policies recognizing the unique circumstances and needs of isolated, or frontier, communities.

A decade later, it was obvious that a national frontier voice was needed, and the Frontier Education Center was incorporated. Its focus expanded as it became apparent that, in the smallest, most isolated communities, health care couldn't be studied apart from other economics.

The center uses the holistic healthy communities model, which includes physical, emotional, economic, cultural, spiritual and environmental health as all necessary to community health.

Federal dominance

Aside from being small and isolated, frontier communities exist in areas largely under the control of the United States government, through the military or other agencies like the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service or the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

And while the Great Plains region is primarily privately owned, in many ways federal agricultural policy rules there.

Which is why, despite diverse geographical homes, most frontier people share being wary of the "Feds." Not surprisingly then, the center sees the best policy solutions coming from frontier communities, filtering upward to state and federal officials. It spreads these ideas and frontier news through its national clearinghouse, so communities can learn from each other.

Last year the center began its Innovations series, case studies that highlight a community's success.

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A long look at the new West

During the past year, The Albuquerque Tribune published a series of articles about the enduring American frontier and the metaphor of a "Buffalo Commons."

This series, which reprinted lectures from the "Visions for the American West" series at the University of New Mexico, explored a variety of issues important to the frontier and the communities that exist there.

The paper presented the diverse work, among others, of Charles Little, of the American Land Publishing Project in Placitas; Peter Letherby, from the Writers on the Range series; and university professors Deborah Popper (City University of New York) and Frank Popper (Rutgers), who for more than 20 years have laid out the statistical reality of the de-population of the plains and the ecological opportunities there.

Earlier work by the Poppers inspired another movement, which is less well known and, some might say, less controversial.

It is dedicated to improving the lives of people who live in frontier communities.

It is led by the Frontier Education Center and the National Clearinghouse for Frontier Communities in Santa Fe.

And it assumes people were and still are a part of the frontier landscape.

Carol Miller

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The first case study was HMS Inc. in Lordsburg, N.M. HMS began as a county hospital, closed in 1979 and then became an on-again, off-again medical practice.

When mining began to shut down in Grant and Hidalgo Counties, HMS brought people together to dig in, support and expand its health care system.

Now HMS has evolved into a large, stable health care system in a new facility, as well as evolving into the county economic development agency, folding economic health into its mission.

The center also has addressed behavioral health problems in frontier communities, recognized that some are doing quite a lot for themselves with very few resources.

These range from an Alaska program to train community members as behavioral health aides — providing mental health, domestic crisis or substance abuse counseling — to a University of New Mexico innovation of providing computers to isolated mental health patients, enabling them to be in online support groups and to communicate by e-mail with care givers.

The center also has identified "structural barriers," like laws or regulations, that discriminate against small communities. It helped create a new kind of health facility, the Frontier Extended Stay Clinic — smaller than a hospital, bigger than a clinic, with limited inpatient capability.

We revealed in 1998 that frontier clinics were holding patients

for extended stays — usually due to weather or quality-of-care issues — and were paying a penalty of not being reimbursed for them.

Now, only five years later, these problems are being addressed in a national demonstration at clinics in Alaska.

These and other examples illustrate that frontier issues only begin with demographics, land use or ecological challenges.

Above all, we believe the frontier is a peopled landscape. It is not the empty, wide open spaces "outsiders" see on maps, flyovers or drives to somewhere else.

Our challenge is to figure out

how to bring the frontier myth face to face with our frontier reality.