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# From Rendezvous to Picket Fence: Tracing the Changing Frontier and Novelistic Development in A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s Western Pentology

Raymond Charles Schmudde

*Eastern Illinois University*

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From Rendezvous to Picket Fence:

Tracing the Changing Frontier

and Novelistic Development

in A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s Western Pentology

(TITLE)

BY

Raymond Charles Schudde

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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Five novels (The Big Sky, The Way West, These Thousand Hills, Arfive, and The Last Valley) form the main fictional body of A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s work. The books have come spaced over a period of almost thirty years during which Guthrie, with each book, has examined the West and his characters in specific chronological and geographic settings. Guthrie's pentology about the West and its people spans over one hundred years, from 1830 to 1945, and depicts historically identifiable periods during the era of, and following, westward expansion. As a skilled observer and story-teller, Guthrie usually keeps an objective distance from his subject, a subject which all too often has, in the past and present, fallen victim to stereotypes and formula writing.

Guthrie's West, specifically the high plains and mountains of Montana, is a fictional world based on and rooted in historic fact. Much like Faulkner, Guthrie has built a stage which he returns to again and again, with different players at different times. But unlike Faulkner, Guthrie is far more concerned with the historic environment, with the dramatic and organic changes that his world went through during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as it evolved from wilderness to frontier to civilization. To depict these vast changes in the evolution of the West, Guthrie uses a narrow focus; he picks common people for his protagonists, people who,

though minor in the greater course of events, will represent the changing times and embody the problems and paradoxes of the changing West.

Guthrie centers on five eras of the historical West: the fur trade, the Oregon trail, the building of the cattle empires, the turn of the century and the coming of the industrial age, and finally, the two decades from 1925 to 1945. Writing about an area whose fictional genre has usually tended toward larger than life characters and extraordinary, if not doubtful, exploits, Guthrie shows that past excesses do not at all tell what it was like or what some of the problems were. His narrow but sharp focus in each book allows the action to be seen as representative for the entire changing frontier; his choice of the common man for his protagonist allows his characters to become democratic heroes. Guthrie's West, as was the real West, is won by the journeyman, the small rancher, the sod-buster, and the churchgoer, the little man who came out West and challenged the elements, the geography, in order actually to live in the land of promise. But the remarkable aspect of Guthrie's pentology, his personal vision of the winning of the West, is his recognition and portrayal of those ambiguities and complexities of frontier life that confronted those who lived in the ever changing West.

Guthrie said from the start that he planned a series of four books.<sup>1</sup> (The fifth is a natural outgrowth of the fourth, and later it will be shown how natural this fifth volume is.) But while there are many similar characteristics in the

books--the democratic hero, the setting, a generally optimistic philosophy, and standard Guthrie scenes--there exists a major division in thematic concern between the first two works and the final three. The first two works pit man against the wilderness, where the nature of the man determines the nature of his success. But in the last three books, the West is already won; the labor now is to establish a rightful and just society. The establishment of such a society on the frontier is ever tempered by the continuing presence and effect of the environment, an environment that was once wilderness, once hostile to all intruders, but which is now subdued, though not tamed. Guthrie comes to this world slowly; he works his way there book by book, feeling his way through the years, from the dangerous wilderness of the Blackfeet to the socially hostile frontier of picket fence propriety, ending up on a frontier of over-zealous patriotism and misguided flood control. Yet the wilderness is present, if not in fact (as in the last book), then in spirit. It is a long journey that begins with a mountain man from Kentucky.

The Big Sky has probably received more critical attention than any other of Guthrie's novels. This attention is not undeserved, for The Big Sky is a fine book, poetic in language which evokes the title metaphor, and it came at a time, 1947, that was ripe for a realistic, adult treatment of the fur trade and the era of the mountain man. Yet it is not Guthrie's best book as it has some faults in characterization, relying on simple stereotypes to portray women and secondary



characters who make up the background. He will not have these faults twenty-three years later with Arfive, his best and most skillfully executed novel. But despite the lack of depth in some characterizations, The Big Sky succeeds in many ways, not the least of which is its portrayal of the white man's response to the ultimate freedom of the wilderness. This epic American theme is explored throughout the novel, indeed throughout all of Guthrie's pentology, but in the other books it is tempered by the growing influences of societal responsibility. Only in The Big Sky does it run free.

Guthrie's poetic skill in re-creating the spirit and the emotional temper of the times is well documented.<sup>2</sup> But The Big Sky is more than a poetic tour de force, it is Guthrie's first examination of man against nature and man against himself. Like all of his books, this one is about change and how well the people in the novel meet the changing circumstances and demands upon their characters. Here are created the motifs and patterns of Guthrie's pentology: the Guthrie Fight, which is in each novel with declining ferocity; the theme of the brothers, an old theme but one that Guthrie uses quite effectively to demonstrate different responses to a given situation; and finally, his two main character types who appear, in modified form, in every book. With The Big Sky, he begins with three rough mountain men living in the wilderness without the sanctions of civilization. One theme of the book is the absolute freedom enjoyed by the fur trappers in the West during the early nineteenth century. Yet haunting the

background of the narrative is the fictional (and historical) specter of westward expansion and encroaching civilization. Each of the three mountain men responds differently to this situation.

Dick Summers, whose past is untold, is the older, experienced mountain man who initiates his two young charges, Boone Caudill and Jim Deakins, to the ways of the mountains. Boone and Jim, who become like brothers, have come West for completely different reasons, reasons which foreshadow the outcome of the novel in ways the reader cannot even imagine the first time through. Boone is escaping his father, whom he has beaten up back in Kentucky because of a quarrel, and a sheriff from a small town where he had a run-in with the law. Boone is shown in these pre-wilderness chapters as a volatile young man who can be pushed only a short way before he reacts violently and irrationally.

Jim goes west not for escape but rather out of loyalty to Boone whom he has befriended and helped escape from the small town jail. Jim is a happy, talkative, and reflective individual, contrasting with Boone's moody silence and lack of contemplation. Summers is also a reflective character, sometimes standing in for Guthrie in summing up the significance of events in his mind.<sup>3</sup>

This book is marked by long passages of interior monologues; some of Guthrie's best poetry is here. Almost any article on The Big Sky will contain at least some lines of Guthrie evoking the mystical beauty and liberating effect of



the great open sky or the mighty mountains or the ever-reaching plains. But the poetry as well as the action is deliberately ironic, because Guthrie's three heroes are really not totally at home in this self-perceived garden, if indeed it is, as Richard Astro asks in his article "The Big Sky and the Limits of Wilderness Fiction," a garden.<sup>4</sup> The obvious irony is the historic one; the mountain men were trapping and trail-blazing themselves out of existence. And for Guthrie's characters, the situation is not only historic but personal as well. Summers regretfully admits to himself that he is getting older and that it may be time for him to quit the mountains if he wants to stay alive. Early in the journey west, when running from some Sioux, Summers realizes that he has grown older; his legs aren't what they used to be. Just before this incident, Summers has knifed and killed a Sioux brave and a "far-off part of Summers' mind told him again he wasn't a real mountain man."<sup>5</sup> Here Guthrie subtly shows emotional evolution during a scene of intense physical action. Summers is becoming too reflective, too aware to remain a living mountain man much longer. He leaves the mountains with regret, but he leaves.

Boone and Jim continue trapping with their adopted Blackfoot friend Poordevil, himself an outcast which may explain Boone's loyalty to the gap-toothed Indian. (Boone's killing of Streak in defense of Poordevil at the '37 Rendezvous is the Guthrie Fight of this novel. From that point on Boone can lay legitimate claim to the title of mountain man and Strong Arm, his Indian name. The fight also demonstrates again

his inability to compromise or to avoid confrontation.) Boone finds the Indian maiden, Teal Eye, whom he loves, and he spends the next five years living as an Indian with the Blackfeet. Sometimes Jim Deakins lives with them, sometimes not. Jim does not know what he wants; he plays the role of trapper, but he misses the community of the forts so he will go off and spend time at the forts, talking. When he tires of the company around the forts and longs for the wilderness, back he goes to the Blackfeet. What Jim does know is that he is attracted to Teal Eye, but she is Boone's squaw, and therefore he will not allow himself to make advances toward her out of loyalty to Boone. The impression is that Jim is not satisfied with life in the mountains, going from place to place, looking for something he can't seem to find.

One of the complaints in Richard Astro's article on wilderness fiction is that "the wilderness novel cannot transcend its occasion."<sup>6</sup> This is true to a great extent, but while The Big Sky is a wilderness story, it is also a story about the response or lack of response to the wilderness. For example, Boone and Teal Eye spend five years living with the Blackfeet as man and wife, yet these years are not given in the novel. The whole Indian life, the entire domestic routine, is implied but unexplored. It would have been explored if Guthrie were writing a novel just about wilderness life, a novel strictly about the day to day Indian routine. But Guthrie's theme in The Big Sky is the revealing of the tragic implications of one man's gross inability to perceive anything

on a level much higher than animal instinct. It is not, as Astro suggests, that Boone ". . . becomes a victim of his landscape."<sup>7</sup> Rather, it is Boone who has failed the environment.

Boone's ability to react immediately in dangerous situations makes him an excellent mountain man if the scale used to take his measure is pure survival. (And that, after all, is the primary measurement.) But this same ability that allows him to survive is also a liability when it comes to being anything resembling a complete human being. Boone's inability to think beyond the present moment, that same stubborn single mindedness which allowed him to shoot the mountain goat in the Marias Pass and thus save Jim's life, is responsible for his believing the two busy-body old braves who point out that his baby and his best friend both have red hair. Boone's character, one which can cope with all the physical complexities of the wilderness, cannot cope at all with the complexities of human emotion. He kills his best friend and must quit the mountains, not because he senses, as Summers did, that his time there is over, but rather because that something which the wilderness said to him, that which he felt yet could not verbalize, was now gone. Boone lost the Tetons because he couldn't conceptualize about them, himself, or his relationship to them.

At the end of the book, Boone is with Dick Summers at Summers' farm in Missouri. In what seems to be the most often quoted passage from The Big Sky, Boone tells Summers about

what has happened and says, "It's like it's all sp'iled for me now, Dick--Teal Eye and the Teton and all. Don't know as I can ever go back. . . ." <sup>8</sup> The question is: is it spoiled or is it Boone who is spoiled? An Oregon immigrant passes as Boone and Summers talk, indicating that it might be the encroachment of civilization that has ruined "it" for Boone. But that is not true. In the next book, The Way West, after leading a train of emigrants to Oregon, Summers decides to stay in the mountains and does not seem to think that it is that spoiled at all. No, the wilderness is not spoiled for Boone; Boone is spoiled for the wilderness. The wilderness is usually a test of physical endurance and skill; indeed, this is the subject of many Westerns, but sometimes the wilderness tests other things in a man besides his frontier skills. It tested Boone's willingness to join the brotherhood of man, red or white, and found him wanting.

As the initial novel in the Guthrie pentology, The Big Sky does indeed suffer some of the liabilities of wilderness fiction. There is little dialogue. But it successfully relates the feeling, the spirit of a grand time that once was. Often, The Big Sky is praised for its realism. <sup>9</sup> Perhaps though, it should be more praised for its detail and sense of spiritual fidelity. Summers and Boone are just too perfectly skilled as mountain men to be realistic. But it must be remembered that Guthrie is doing two things with this novel. The first and most obvious is his successful attempt to convey that mystical feeling, or spirit, of the West, a West that his



characters continually perceive as a beautiful garden, although the incidents and experiences seem to indicate exactly the opposite--that it is a very dangerous garden, with beauty only on the surface. This response to the wilderness, this seeing of beauty and enjoyment of abundance in the face of constant personal danger, is a difficult feeling to verbalize. The western experience itself, that stark communion with an indifferent environment, is one that is perhaps more felt than understood, more mystical than intellectual. "[L]ooking west beyond the river. A man might have thought the country was saying something to him."<sup>10</sup> This magical re-creation is wilderness fiction; it creates a state of mind, a feeling. It is not plot but spirit, not theme but emotion. Ultimately, the experience is religious, but as the title of Astro's article suggests, it is limited when it comes to fiction. It cannot carry a novel by itself. Because Guthrie is aware of that limit, he does not ask the title metaphor to carry the burden of his tale; rather, he paints the wilderness as the backdrop and gives the weight of his theme to Boone.

The second thing Guthrie accomplishes is his predetermined theme of showing that "Each man kills the thing he loves. No man ever did it more thoroughly or in a shorter time than the fur hunters. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Thus for Boone Caudill, character is fate, just as it would be for the fur trappers as a whole. Boone, by being himself, loses everything that he loved. He has not changed as much as he has just continued on course. In fact, change would have been good for Boone. Always stubborn

and unwilling to be pushed, Boone only agrees to guide Peabody over the mountains because his Blackfoot tribe opposes his doing so. Thus Boone sets into motion an entire course of events which will lead to his destroying everything he loves, his best friend, his marriage, and the unpopulated mountains. This is tragedy; he cannot help it, and he cannot see it coming. Guthrie's tale is told, a tale for which the wilderness must be present, because it must be present for Boone to lose it. The wilderness is not gone; Guthrie's evoking of the wilderness spirit proves that. The wilderness is just lost to Boone, westward expansion notwithstanding. Boone could spend the rest of his life along the Green River (he is heading into the sunset at the end of the novel), but he would never again hear the ". . . country saying something to him."

Guthrie's fiction evolves along with the times. When Summers comes back west in the second book he brings a society with him, albeit an artificial, temporary, and transient society, but one in which people talk to each other and not to the mountains. And it is after this second book that Guthrie decides to quit the solitary wilderness and to cast his lot with the society of towns.

In The Way West (1949), Guthrie dramatically changes pace. His characterizations are much better than in The Big Sky, and his secondary characters are much more fully developed. He also portrays his women characters much better; it is hard to believe that Rebecca Evans and Teal Eye both come from the pen of the same man. Indeed this novel, even



more than The Big Sky, is the historically rooted, realistic work. And while Guthrie uses the common struggle of the wagon train against the obstacles of the trail for background, much like he used the magnificence of the high country as background for The Big Sky, his real concern is focused not on the turning wagon wheels or the threat of Indians, but rather upon the human interaction among the members of the train.

Tying this second novel to the first, Guthrie has Dick Summers lead the emigrant train west across some of the same wilderness he travelled with Boone and Jim. Summers is much the same character in The Way West as he was in The Big Sky. This consistency does him little justice in The Way West. As while he seemed to fit in so well in the fur trade book, Summers seems obviously mythic and idealized when contrasted to the realistic types who make up the wagon train. Summers' official role of guide is more often shown as sage by Guthrie as Summers not only guides the emigrants west but also imparts wisdom to Lije Evans and Evans's son, Brownie. Both Evans and Summers are quiet, wise men; both were friends in Missouri. This works to such an effect that at times Lije and Summers are hard to tell apart, except that Summers is the one with the mountain skills. As Lije evolves the confidence needed to lead the train, Summers is no longer needed and knowing this slips away. Thus, in The Way West, the clear distinctions of mentor/student and brothers, as found in The Big Sky, are missing. Lije and Summers combine both relationships. Guthrie does not do this again until Arfive.

It is the characterizations in The Way West which receive so much praise.<sup>12</sup> Guthrie not only sets his characters against the tortures of the trail, but he more importantly sets them against each other. Except for the major Tadlock-Evans conflict, most interaction is not hostile at all, but is instead the unexciting, everyday interaction of normal people. There is no great moral dilemma to confront the hero; there are no sudden realizations of human truth. Instead Guthrie moves along slowly, like, as Frank Goodwyn suggests, "the oxen and the wagons."<sup>13</sup> Guthrie lets events, birth, death, bad weather, take their slow course. In a story all too loaded with the potential to turn into melodrama, Guthrie skillfully keeps to the regular day-to-day life. The enemy of the train is not the Indians, who in fact, in a demonstration of Guthrie's skilled restraint, never attack, but is instead the boring tedium of the dull, hard trail routine. The members of the train fight boredom and exhaustion; they complain and squabble among themselves. They act selfishly, and they have doubts. They are all Guthrie's democratic heroes, regular folk enduring all kinds of hardships to walk to Oregon, and to a dream.

These are not the same people who populated The Big Sky. For the emigrants, going west is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Summers is the only person in this book for whom being in the West is in itself enough for happiness. The emigrants have many different reasons for going west: Evans, with vague idealistic glimmerings, wants

something more out of life, Tadlock hopes to make a career of politics on the frontier, the Fairmans unselfishly go west simply for the health of their young son Tod, and the McBees are running away from bad debts. It is just an average company, made up of average people, the kind who, as Guthrie shows, really won the West.

With this different class of people going west (this company even includes a preacher who is taken under wing by the all-time pantheist Dick Summers) their response to the land is bound to be different from that of the mountain man: They just do not see the same landscape that Summers sees. In a part of the book which symbolically shows the already fast changing shape of the West, Summers has guided the train as far as the Green River. This is the same area where Summers was a mountain man many years ago, where he lived the free life of the trapper, where he hunted, drank, swapped stories, and had to watch his top knot. Observing the area, Summers feels a mystical communion with the land; he thinks about the old times, of Boone and Jim, of how a bear almost killed him. Evans joins him, looks around and pronounces to Summers his thoughts on all this natural beauty, declaring that ". . . a man wants to stick a plow in this country."<sup>14</sup> The West will never be the same again. Summers is more like the Indians than he is like these emigrants; he is content to live off the land and not disturb its natural beauty. Evans, for all his fine qualities, is an example of the future. The land is there to exploit, to get out of it what one can.

The irony of these two men's responses is impressed even further with the realization that Summers can travel this country at his ease, with just horse, rifle, and bedroll. The emigrants, with all their material trappings, wagons, supplies, furniture, and livestock, are the ones having a hard time.

The Guthrie Fight in this novel comes when, after being visited by some thieving Indians, some of the company decides to lynch a young brave whom they have caught. (This scene is nicely counter-pointed earlier when Brownie was caught by the Sioux at Independence Rock.) Tadlock, Evans's rival, is at the head of the lynching faction; and when Evans objects to their treatment of the young Indian, he and Tadlock fight it out. Evans wins of course, and from then on Evans's claim to leadership (he already has been voted captain of the train) is truly legitimate. Tadlock and his followers then split from the train and go to California instead of Oregon.

One of the most intriguing and skillfully drawn characters in The Way West is Curtis Mack. Mack is neither saint or villain. His presentation is Guthrie's first truly compassionate account of a person with both weaknesses and strengths, neither of which are very great. He is the most complex character yet introduced by Guthrie, a type that Guthrie will work with from here on out. Curtis Mack is no Evans or Summers; he does not have that general foundation of strength or hero-of-the-novel goodness which allows him to



always act properly in times of moral dilemma. And likewise, neither is he a Tadlock, a man who will let nothing stand in his way, who is so insensitive that he wants to kill all the dogs in the train. No, when Mack does wrong, he suffers; he feels it. He suffers from self-doubt, more legitimate self-doubt than Evans (who must overcome because he is the hero). When Mack shoots the young Kaw brave, he does it out of impulse and frustration, not out of hate. The train has lost some cattle during the night to Indians. Mack wants to do something, but prudence dictates that they wait till morning to give chase. Towards dawn, Mack goes out alone in an almost suicidal move after his frigid wife has refused again to make love with him. After shooting the innocent brave in cold blood, Mack is drained of all emotion. He finds that it is not like the dime novels. Later, Mack seduces Mercy McBee, probably the best looking young girl on the train, because he still is refused sex by his wife. Afterwards, he feels the misery of guilt in conflict with his still hungry desire. Mercy becomes pregnant, and when she tells Mack, he feels remorse but there is nothing he can do. He tries to talk to his wife, but that does not work. He can only live with his guilt about Mercy and about the poor dead Kaw. When Brownie marries Mercy, with full knowledge that she is pregnant by Mack, Mack all too obviously offers a yoke of oxen to the newlyweds, and Brownie, without politeness, turns him down.

Guthrie does an excellent job here of showing someone who is not heroic and who acts badly, without making him a

villain. This is a major turning point for Guthrie who now after two historical novels has developed a technique that need not hold him so closely to history. From here on Guthrie's books move to town. No longer will man be battling the wilderness for survival. It is, as Joe Hairston says, that "In The Way West the day of the mountain man is over; the questions are what kind of man will replace him and what kind of society will he build."<sup>15</sup> This is to be Guthrie's new theme, one which he will explore in the next three books, and his new character, the lesser, imperfect man. For the mountain man is finished both historically and for Guthrie, as he has Dick Summers--once Dick has successfully led the train past the Snake and has tutored Lije on how to be a frontier leader--slip away from the emigrants to live the rest of his days in the mountains he loves. No one, not even the reader, sees Dick leave. He is just gone. This is a suitable and symbolic ending to Guthrie's wilderness fiction. The emigrants have come and the wild free country will end soon too. The old Dick Summers can only disappear now, disappear like Boone, for their time is over. Guthrie has taken the other path. He has said what there is to say about the mountain man both as mythic figure and as protagonist in a grave tragedy.

Wilderness fiction does have a place in western literature, because it is the most poetic of the western genres. Guthrie successfully evokes and communicates that lost time of the mountain man. But that cannot be used as a recurring



theme, because basically it is a feeling, an atmosphere that is never the same once you return to it again.

A river wasn't the same once a man camped by it. The tree he saw wasn't the same tree if he had only so much as pissed against it. There was the first time and the place alone, and afterwards there was the place and the time and the man he used to be, all mixed up, one with the other.<sup>16</sup>

Summers goes off to the mountain idyll, but the reader cannot follow because that literature is nonverbal; it is felt and difficult, if not impossible, to translate into words. Thus, Dick Summers has gone off in one direction while Guthrie goes in another. Guthrie heads for town, for people, for the experience of human interaction. Not that he will neglect the environment, it is just that his major concern will no longer be his characters' response to it. Rather, he will now spend his energies on the way people respond to each other.

The complexities of the maturing frontier become quite evident in Guthrie's third novel of the pentology, These Thousand Hills (1956), called "artistically" his "best novel" by critic David Stineback.<sup>17</sup> Guthrie describes the career of a young man who rises to social and financial prominence in the Montana cattle industry of the 1880's. The man is Lat Evans, grandson of Lije Evans and son of Brownie and Mercy Evans of The Way West. Lat is the couple's third and only surviving child, the first, the one fathered by Curtis Mack, and the second having died as youths. Young Lat is anxious to make his way in the world, to amount to something more than his father and grandfather have amounted to.

They had come to Oregon in search of some vague dream of a better life and ended up hard working poor farmers, the same as they were back in Missouri. They may not have reaped any material harvest from Oregon, but they seem at least to have some piece of mind. (After having seen the elephant, what else is there to do but to go back to work?) Lat, however, wants more, a tangible more, and thus sets out from over-grazed and over-populated Oregon with a fatherly trail boss named Ram Butler to drive a cattle herd from Oregon to Montana.

Lat is a skilled horseman and so the trail driving does not come too hard for him. Ram befriends him and teaches him the ways of the cowpoke in much the same way Dick Summers tutored Boone Caudill. This is more than just a passing similarity; even though Ram and the trail drive are a small part of the book, Lat ends up sharing some fatal character traits with his fictional cousin, Boone. Another relationship reminiscent of Boone is Lat's friendship with a young trail hand named Tom Ping. Tom Ping does not share Jim Deakin's characteristics, but he does share Deakin's brotherly role in relationship to the Guthrie protagonist.

Lat Evans goes to Montana because that is where he thinks he can make his fortune and not "die poor."<sup>18</sup> Tom listens to Lat's dream of riches and tells Lat a story that can be juxtaposed as a metaphor for the two young men.

"You ever see a badger and a coyote pardnered up? Good friends, they say. Pards from way back. But I taken notice that the badger can dig and the

coyote can't. The badger he digs out a prairie dog or gopher, and the coyote grabs it and slopes off, bein' a faster runner."

"Meaning what?"

"Workin' men is badgers."<sup>19</sup>

Lat has no intentions at all of being a badger, and for him just about any means will be justifiable to reach his goal. This is an intriguing response to the country that was once unlimited bounty. For Lat, the hard learned lesson of Oregon is that the frontier paradise is finite, and that he had better get his before somebody else does or before there is nothing left to be had. The era of Summers and the individual man content in the garden is ended. Society has come to the frontier; pockets of civilization are springing up everywhere. And civilization means people, lots of them, and along with people come the material values of society. As the years pass in this novel, these values become more deeply inbedded into the very essence of the community's identity, until they are second nature, no longer questioned, almost as if they had been there from the start. It is with this kind of backdrop that the tragedy of Lat Evans develops.

Primed with dreams of being a successful rancher and limited by lack of funds and resources, Lat gambles most of his trail pay that he will be able to ride Jehu's horse, Sugar. But what astounds Lat is the extent to which his trail partners are also backing him. They, too, wager most of their money that he will be able to ride the unbreakable stallion. Displaying their loyalty to him as a friend as well as their faith in him as a trail hand, Lat's partners back him almost

to their last dime. When he rides Sugar, their faith in him is proved, but even if he had not ridden the horse and they had gone broke, it was still, as Ram said, "Win or lose, no man of us will fault you."<sup>20</sup> Their faith in him is separate from the financial end of the wager, yet they are freely willing to back him with all of their money. To them, the money is not as important as their faith. This admirable attitude of moral commitment over financial concern is one which, later on, Lat will not partake of.

After riding Sugar, Lat meets Callie Kash, niece of Miss Fran, the local madam, and the only girl in Miss Fran's house who can pick and choose whom she decides to bed with. Immediately Callie and Lat fall for each other. Callie is easily criticized for being a stereotyped figure, the good-hearted whore, which should have ended with Bret Harte. But her role in the playing out of Lat's moral decline and rebirth requires that she be good-hearted, requires that she truly love Lat despite the fact that she is a whore. Guthrie has her, as he has Ram and the trail hands, represent the fading naturalness of the frontier West. She believes in Lat, no questions asked. But that way of looking at life is fast becoming obsolete on the frontier of the 1880's, as Lat himself later proves. Callie, like the cowboys, supports Lat financially when he races Sugar against an Indian pony to raise a stake for his ranch. She gives him a thousand dollars, all her savings, to bet on his winning. She also, and more importantly, supports Lat emotionally, giving of herself and



asking nothing in return. When Lat returns, wounded and exhausted from his capture and long trek with the Indians, she nurses him back to health.

Guthrie may be creating a straw woman here, but Callie must be present in her obviously positive form to act as a choice for Lat to accept or reject. When Conrad, the Banker, offers to match Lat's winnings from the race, large winnings thanks to Callie's loan, with a loan from the bank along with the advice that hard working ranchers do not spend time in whorehouses, Lat makes his choice and breaks off public contact with Callie. He still continues to see her, but now he only comes in the back way and at night. He also now insists on paying her for the sex that she gives him freely with love. Lat has chosen the appearance of respectability over naturalness. He has made his choice and gone over to the side weighted with money and society's image of what is right; he denies his moral obligation to the woman who loves him and has sacrificed much for him. If he pays her when he sleeps with her, he thinks somehow that makes it all right.

When Lat, recently the winner of the horse race that made him his grub stake and receiver of the bank loan and advice from Mr. Conrad, is approached by Tom and asked to stand up along with Callie at Tom's and Jen's wedding, Lat indignantly replies that Tom's idea is foolish. Jen is a whore and will always be known as such. This rebuke from Lat, who himself still sees Callie, is thrown at the one man who stuck with Lat when the times were hardest, when both men

were wolfing and got captured by Indians, Lat getting seriously wounded in the encounter. Tom could have escaped, run and saved his own life, but Tom, though once tempted to run for it, decided that friendship was more important and stayed, thus saving, by nursing and taking care of him, Lat's life. As it was, both men were released when Lat was able to cure the chief's wounded son, an act which Lat probably would not have lived long enough to do had Tom abandoned him and run. Thus Lat's rebuke denies the bonds of friendship, indeed the brotherhood, that has formed between them. Again Lat denies a moral obligation because it would not appear proper. Tom cannot believe what he hears and stomps off, refusing to ever have anything to do with Lat Evans again.

At one point, Guthrie has old man Godwin, the only stranger to bet that Lat could break Sugar, talking with Mike Carmichael, Lat's foreman, and Tom Ping. Guthrie mentions Tom's financial decline since he broke off with Lat and married Jen. Godwin, in a bit of frontier wisdom characteristic of Guthrie, comments about Lat's still seeing Callie in secret. Godwin says, "Oh, I s'pose I understand, but it wasn't until white wives and picket fences began comin' in that a man got damned for acting like a man."<sup>21</sup> Here is born one of Guthrie's best metaphors for the condition of the frontier, a metaphor and theme which will concern him in this and his next novel. Taking its place alongside the Blackfeet, the small pox, and the punitive Indian wars, the picket fence morality and mentality, and the chamber of commerce



values that live behind it, become another scourge of the West. The hypocrisy of the picket fence morality, that acceptance of almost any behavior as long as there is a façade of respectability to cloak the truth from pious eyes, ruins every meaningful relationship in Lat Evans's life just as surely as the inability to conceptualize ruined Boone Caudill's relationship with the wilderness.

The groundwork is thus set for Lat's social and financial ascension. He becomes a prominent figure in the church and in civic affairs. In a subtle drawing of a conflict of interest, Guthrie has Lat on the school board, hiring and marrying the proper and upright school marm, Joyce, from back east. Lat's success can be measured positively only by the picket fence ideals and values which he so readily adopted when it was opportune for him to do so. He is the most successful rancher in the area (due in part to his skillful ranch management and in part to his being able to buy surrounding ranches cheaply after they were ruined during the bad winter of 1886-87 while his survived because of his farsighted management), a respected figure in the community, and a possible candidate for the state legislature. He has only lost his one proven, best friend and only abandoned the one woman who really loved him and whom he loved and would have stayed with had not her profession been a liability to his plans to succeed.

When Lat's eastern wife cannot stand the Montana climate and must live in town most of the time, it leaves Lat

with nothing else to do but to try to be more successful. For Lat, the means justify the end. He has kept his promise to himself not to die poor. Born out of the old West of limitless opportunity, he is forming the new West of towns, fences, and propriety. On the personal level, Lat has lost touch with the brotherhood of man. Ambition, along with its progeny callous indifference, has separated Lat from the brotherhood of man, a separation supported by propriety and strengthened by greed. With all his success and bright outlook, Lat, by leaving Callie, wanted to be good; however, he confused the meaning of good with respectable.<sup>22</sup>

With the complex series of events crowded into the end of the novel, Lat finally confronts his failure to accept his responsibility, his part, in the brotherhood of man. With all his high moral talk and righteous poses, he only ends up an unwilling, albeit participating, member of the vigilante raid on a rustler hideout up in the Missouri breaks. After secretly letting one of the rustlers escape (because the rustler is Tom Ping) Lat rides him down and then doesn't shoot him but tells him that they now are even, since each has saved the other's life. Lat still cannot understand that it is just not the same thing; he cannot understand Tom's disgust with him. Letting Tom escape was, to Lat, just repayment, pure and simple, as with a loan from the bank. He cannot grasp the significance of Tom's loyalty when they were held by the Indians and cannot realize that some debts are debts of brotherhood, to be repaid in kind. Loyalty is one

concept foreign to Lat, completely blocked from his vision by dollar signs and his desire to be respectable.

While with the vigilantes, Lat has fought (the Guthrie Fight of this book and possibly the turning point for Lat as he stands on his principles instead of his ambition) and beaten Whey Belly Hector, a no-good and blood-thirsty man who also has eyes on Callie. After their return, Whey Belly has gone to Callie's, beaten her up when she refused him and in turn has been stabbed to death by Callie's black servant, Happy. This sets the scene for Lat's last chance to renounce his hypocritical respectability and embrace true goodness and membership in the race. Summoned from his marital bed in the middle of the night, Lat is taken to Callie's bordello and told of Whey Belly's murder and the difficult situation that Callie is in. With no witnesses to the murder, Callie is the prime suspect. (Only Callie and Happy know, at this point, that Happy did it. Lat guesses it later.) The lawyer present asks Lat if he would testify to Callie's character, an act which would most likely be very beneficial to Callie's defense, but yet at the same time would expose Lat's past relationship with Callie and damage his reputation and his marriage. Lat, finally accepting his moral obligation to others, agrees to testify and then goes home to tell his wife, who takes it badly and locks herself in the bedroom.

The following morning, after Lat has talked to Joyce, he and Carmichael realize that someone ought to get rid of Hector's body. They arrive at Callie's house to be greeted

at the door by Jen, Tom Ping's wife. Jen informs them that Callie and Happy are gone for good, and that she doesn't know where. It becomes clear that Tom has helped Callie and Happy get away and has gotten rid of the body, thus sparing Lat from having to testify. Callie and Happy have chosen to leave, with Tom's assistance, so that Lat would not have to jeopardize his marriage or his good name. In difficult straits, they still remembered their moral obligations; in Lat's mind, he is once again indebted to Tom.

When Lat goes to a saloon later that afternoon, he has a run-in with old man McBee, his grandfather, who also appeared in The Way West. McBee is a leech and has been sucking money out of Lat on the pretext of needing a stake so that he could leave town and then wouldn't be there to tell people that he was Lat's grandfather and that Lat's mother's first child was a bastard (Curtis Mack's child). Lat kicks the old sponge out and admits that the man was his grandfather. Both Stineback and Hairston feel this admission is a big step in Lat's reconstruction as a human,<sup>23</sup> yet no one in the saloon gives it any importance, and the bartender just continues to wipe the bar, not showing any shock at all at Lat's claim that the old man is his grandfather. Lat himself doubts taking the old man's word that Mercy bore a bastard. This incident, while some measure of a step in the proper direction, is a step taken at no expense to his respectability.

After McBee is ejected from the saloon, Tom Ping comes



in and tries to force Lat into a show down. This scene is told more or less from Carmichael's viewpoint, as Lat refuses to shoot it out with Ping and thus opens himself to the charge of cowardice. Guthrie probably shows this scene through Carmichael's eyes because it must be made clear that Lat could have killed Tom but has chosen not to. The point is that Lat and Tom are now even again and that Lat's moral obligation has been paid by a public display of cowardice, which obviously costs him his political career.

Even with his political future lost, Lat can in no way be considered even with Tom. Lat has not regained that much humanity; he is too far gone now to return to the old natural ways. The only plus for him is that he is now aware of the difference between the way he has acted, his response both to the land and his friends being an exploitive one, and the way his friends have responded to him, their friendship to him being unaffected by his choosing picket-fence morality and commercial success over loyalty to those who supported him when he most needed it. When Lat returns home, Joyce is ready to take him back, but her understanding is limited. As Walter Van Tilburg Clark says, Lat returns "half-devoted to a Joyce who cannot understand, he makes not his peace but his compromise with the new age."<sup>24</sup> Thus for Lat, his revelation leaves him in a slightly better situation than it left his fictional cousin Boone Caudill. Lat has lost his one best friend in Tom and his one true love in Callie; he has lost his political career, and surely he has lost a great

deal of the respect, however dubious in value, the community had for him. But he still has Joyce and his son and his cattle empire. Unlike Boone, Lat is aware of how he did lose the things that he lost, how it was his own character and ambition which forfeited away those intangible valuables of life.

Lat's predicament is much like Boone Caudill's. The difference lies in the men themselves and the world around them. Boone was not complex; he did not live in a complex world, whereas the universe for Lat Evans grows increasingly complex, with issues, people, and business all demanding a disproportionate amount of the proper responses. The frontier is now much more complex than it was for Boone, primarily because man no longer deals directly with the land, but now instead deals with society and the many varieties of people on the frontier. Guthrie's ending, as Clark has observed, is a compromise. Lat has both lost and gained. He has lost some of the relationships which make life most meaningful, but he has gained awareness of what he has lost and how he lost it. And though awareness will not, cannot, replace that which is missing, it is by its very existence the second best consolation in the increasing complexity of the changing frontier. In a theme to be echoed in the last novel, there are no clear choices, and he cannot do everything. Lat makes his decisions in favor of business and respectability over friends and truth. He makes his choices, suffers the consequences, loses what he has chosen against, and gains what



he has striven to achieve. The tragedy is in the choice.

These Thousand Hills is the pivotal book in the Guthrie pentology. Here the page has been completely turned from wilderness fiction to a concern for people interacting with each other. Some of his characters are representative types to be sure, but these types represent important principles in his drama of the changing frontier. Lat Evans is the new man, transforming the old Edenic dream into a new expression, changing the old frontier into a newer, more commercial West. The price is the importation of picket fence morality, an act which causes the loss of the old ways, the old feelings and responses. Callie, Tom Ping, and the old bull buffalo that Lat watches lose out to the wolves are examples of the old way passing, a way that did not allow for fenced ranges, irrigation, and the spoiling of the open plains.<sup>25</sup> The end of the old ways is the price of progress. As Stineback says, "Callie and Tom embody the stasis of a life which Lat has left behind--a simpler, more natural existence without the moral conventions of a more complex civilization."<sup>26</sup> No longer will there be easy choices, easy answers. Guthrie is writing his way into a newer and more complex world. His protagonists are becoming increasingly more democratic and less mythic. Ram Butler, spiritual descendant of Dick Summers and mentor to Lat, is out of the novel before page eighty. Lat Evans will now assume the role of fictional father to the Guthrie protagonist, the small man, succeeding and failing at the same time in a complex

world which, outside of the immediate community, pays no attention.

This complex world, this town, is where Guthrie will now stay. He has come in from the range for good, and any forays which he might make in the future will be limited and symbolic only in their showing once more the passing of an era. It's just that there are more stories to tell, more issues to confront, in the frontier community made up of common people than there are with a single man struggling to survive in the hostile garden. Guthrie likes this town, Tansytown it is called in These Thousand Hills, the town near where Lat has his ranch and to which Callie moved from Fort Benton. This Tansytown, which will become Arfive in Arfive,<sup>27</sup> is a place Guthrie knows well. It is much like Chouteau, Montana, the town where Guthrie grew up; the river, the geography are all the same.<sup>28</sup> But most important is the fact that it is in town, not in the wilderness, where the last three novels of the pentology take place.

Unfortunately, These Thousand Hills, for all its importance as the turning point in Guthrie's pentology, is not that good a novel. It lacks the inspiration and poetic language of The Big Sky, and it fails to be as exact and subtly structured as Arfive. But Guthrie's struggle in working out his new themes is worth it when he reaches the next book, Arfive, where the complexities increase, the characterizations develop, and the choices become less and less distinct. If the picket fence morality is harmful to Lat Evans, it is an

even more destructive force in Arfive.

While Guthrie, in These Thousand Hills, was making his novelistic move from the range to town, he also painted the portrait of the changing landscape, the end of the open range, the fencing off of the land, the changing of the courses of rivers for irrigation, and the building of new towns. Those changes showed the frontier in a constant state of flux, from the wild and open country of The Big Sky to the fenced in ranches along the Tansy. While These Thousand Hills is the novel of the organic countryside, Arfive is about the organic town.

Probably the best of the five books, Arfive (1970) begins at the turn of the century and concerns the transformation of a settlement from a camp to a town. This transformation--birth is probably the more accurate word--and the men and women who act as midwives for this birth, give Guthrie material for a narrative which is hardly ever out of town and a book that has more dialogue than any of the previous three. Guthrie's best women characters appear here, his best characters all around, in fact. Also in Arfive, Guthrie confronts the old nemesis, propriety and progress, the price progress and town maturation extract from natural man. And most memorable in Arfive is Guthrie's protagonist, Benton Collingsworth, fictional descendant of Boone Caudill (they even share the same initials) and Lat Evans, a man who bears the burden of being so right and so wrong at the same time.

Taking some of Arfive's lesser themes first, the book details the town's evolution into the twentieth century, from telephone lines strung along the barb wire fences, to indoor plumbing, to the arrival of the automobile. Guthrie does not show these changes with a heavy hand. Sometimes he will slip in an example of the difference that progress has made, something small yet sufficient to represent the change. One of the nicest of these is changing the names of the butte and river near the town. When Benton Collingsworth arrives, they are pointed out to him as Titty Butte and the Titty River. Benton winces. As time passes in the book, everybody has started referring to them as Breast Butte and the Breast River. These name changes are never discussed, never deliberately decided upon. They just take place, results of an increasing self-awareness among the town's people. Other times Guthrie will rely on a list, a seemingly artificial and awkward device to show change, but not when the items on that list are things people now take for granted. At one point, seven years after Benton has come to Arfive, the changes are listed as: a bank, a second store, Jews, a doctor, a dentist, a lawyer, a third high school teacher, and a newspaper. There is talk of: electric lights, a railroad spur, and a separate building for the post office.<sup>29</sup> Later, when someone gets off the train in Arfive, Guthrie subtly shows that things have changed.

But the artistry of Arfive is Guthrie's rendering of Benton Collingsworth and his wife May. They are from back



east, Indiana, and the West holds different fates for each of them. They, along with Benton's friend Mort Ewing, are greatly responsible for the progress of Arfive; they are, it could be said, the midwives for the town's delivery into the twentieth century. Yet they each react differently to the West. Benton arrives apprehensive, with full knowledge that he will be an outsider in a stark land with a skeptical population. But he takes to the land quickly. Somewhat of an outdoors man, Benton observes the vast distances of the big sky country with a critical eye. "It came to Collingsworth's mind that distance--this distance--could imprison or free a man."<sup>30</sup> This almost sounds like the West talking to Boone Caudill and it is, even to the extent that as Boone Caudill was blind to certain aspects of his life so is Benton Collingsworth blind, a tragic impairment of insight for an educated man who, though he can perceive the correct position on almost every issue, is bound up by the picket fence morality of turn of the century Methodism, a burden which leaves him distanced and insensitive to the feelings of others, and stubbornly blind to his own wife's suffering. Benton feels the liberating aspects of the vast high plains, but distance also imprisons him, the distance his strict morality puts between him and the rest of natural mankind, including his wife. He feels free, but only as free as his stiff morality will allow.

Guthrie drives this theme home again and again. He began it with Lat Evans, but Benton is the purest example of what price progress extracts from mankind. Without propriety,



without the order and the money and the respectability which picket fence morality brings to a settlement, there would be no progress. But the price is great: the destruction of the land, the end of natural man, the false front structures symbolic of the false front of respectability where the appearance of goodness is more important than goodness itself, and most horridly, the destruction of the natural interaction between people of different attitudes, the hypocrisy of a societally sanctioned caste system based on arbitrary church values imposed upon the natural populace in the name of respectability: the whores must eat behind a curtain in the restaurant.

While the West offers a limited freedom to Benton and the other men who inhabit their self-decreed man's world, it is a prison of loneliness and hardship for the women. Taken for granted by a husband who loves her but will not help her, who does not really see her, May Collingsworth is not much more than cook, servant, house cleaner, and baby-maker for her husband Benton. This is the prime sadness in the novel, the wasting of the women by loving but unfeeling men. One woman, Mrs. Ross, the wife of one of the more well-off ranchers and friends of the Collingsworths, comes to see May one day when May is alone in the house. Mrs. Ross speaks strangely, as if her mind were elsewhere. She complains that she could never get used to the endless sky and the infinite distances. She calls the country and the sky a prison, and the men, stallions. Mrs. Ross has been beaten by the wind long enough.

She has come to tell May, because May has been her only friend, that she is leaving. Perhaps also she has come as a warning for May, a warning that May must all too well recognize but, with even more stoicism than her husband could ever muster, will choose to ignore out of loyalty to him.

Other women figure largely in this novel, most notably the pairs of Eva Fox and Juliet Justice, and Margaret Carson and Marie Wolf. Eva Fox runs the whorehouse in Arfive at the time Benton arrives to start the first high school in the area. Eva has come across a girl, Juliet, who has had an unfortunate past. Born of ne'er-do-well parents, after her father's death Juliet took a job as a hired girl and was repeatedly raped by her boss. She ran away and came to Eva's place, where she would rather whore and get paid than be raped. But Eva does not want Juliet to be a prostitute because Juliet is smart, still quite young, and besides is frigid due to her rude initiation into sex. Eva puts pressure on Mort Ewing to try to get Juliet into Collingsworth's school. Juliet gets in because of her ability even though Collingsworth, thinking of his and the school's reputation, initially does not want to accept her. Benton's picket fence sensibility is at work here, but his relenting is justly rewarded when Juliet turns out to be, of course, an "A" student. Benton then punches and knocks down the wise-mouthed deputy who suggests to Benton that the teacher has been sampling Juliet's favors. Benton gains legitimacy as a man, and the town's respect as well, with this one punch. The Guthrie Fight has now become

much more subdued and much less important to the plot.

Collingsworth relents once again, later on, when one of his teachers comes to him with an Indian girl she believes should be in the high school. This teacher is Margaret Carson and the girl is Marie Wolf. Margaret says she will sponsor Marie and Collingsworth agrees. But Margaret turns out to be a lesbian and seduces and takes Marie as her lover. As the scandal breaks, Benton gives Margaret a chance to deny the accusation (he believes it to be fabricated by his enemies on the school board), made by a school board member's window-peeping son. Only Margaret does not deny her affair with Marie and in fact tells Collingsworth that she loves the Indian girl and that he could never understand. In tears, Margaret tells Benton that he is the fairest man she has ever met and that she will, of course, resign. Margaret then goes home and commits suicide. Benton is at a loss as his strict moral code has not prepared him for this sort of complication in his life.

Mort Ewing is the opposite of Benton Collingsworth, yet at the same time they are friends because they are both thinkers. Their relationship is that of the now familiar Guthrie Brothers. There is also a bit of a mentor-student relationship between the two men but not as much as between Dick Summers and Lije Evans. Yet it seems clear that if Benton is the descendant of Boone and Lat, then Mort can trace his lineage back through Ram Butler and Dick Summers. "Mort is the voice of tolerant wisdom in the novel,"<sup>31</sup> says Joe

Hairston, and nowhere is this more clearly shown than with the difficulties arising from the disclosure of Margaret Carson's sexual preference. In an interior monologue, Guthrie has Mort think:

How much would a man like Collingsworth recognize?  
How much would he be bound to reject? Well, anyhow,  
woman-to-woman love could be stomached, if not  
understood, whereas man-to-man love couldn't be.<sup>32</sup>

Mort Ewing, the modern version of Dick Summers, acts as a moral anchor to the events in the novel. He counter-points Collingsworth's runaway propriety and acts as an example of how well the old West can adapt to the new. (Albeit there are few like him.) Mort's evenness and complete understanding of every problem (he even gets the best girl, Juliet, in a May-December marriage) make him somewhat unrealistic. But then he is not at the center of the novel, Collingsworth is, and Mort is there as a fictional foil, not for Benton, but for the reader's perception of Benton and Benton's actions.

What could be called the second Guthrie Fight of the novel takes place when Mort slugs Nick Brudd in an attempt to stop Brudd from displaying the late Margaret Carson's dildo before the saloon crowd, thus humiliating and disgracing Benton since she worked for him. Brudd then comes at Mort with a revolver and Benton appears, walks down Brudd, gun and all, while Mort tackles Brudd. Benton has shown his courage by walking into the gun; he was actually coming to hand in his resignation because of the Carson scandal, and the school board members present refuse to accept his resignation. This



may be a late claim to legitimacy, but actually seems more a vote of confidence from the townspeople rather than the initial acceptance that they had showed Benton earlier when he knocked down the deputy.

Before the final crisis for Benton there comes a strange and ambiguous event. That event leaves Benton puzzled and slightly more aware that there is meaning in life going on somewhere just outside of his propriety-limited reach. Benton is asked to read over the funeral of an Indian baby, out on the reservation. The baby was killed when it was sat on by a drunken Indian during a reservation dance. Benton goes, unaware of whose child it is or who requested his presence. It turns out that it is Marie Wolf's baby and that she asked for him. Benton is horrified at the circumstances of the baby's death, yet strangely touched that Marie would ask for him. After the funeral, Collingsworth speaks to the man who brought him to the reservation, Smoky Moreau, a half-breed and Benton's fishing companion. Smoky embodies the mysticism of the land and the older, more natural ways of the time before the picket fences. Smoky's lesson is clear: the only constant is the earth; all else is transient. Benton can maybe see that, but he can't live it because he is a white man, a town man, and a man of education, propriety, and a respectability that will not allow him to live the natural life.

The final tragedy, sadness, comes when May Collingsworth dies in childbirth. The events surrounding her death



are examples of the burden picket fence morality has placed upon May and her well-meaning but unfeeling, inept husband. Pregnant again,<sup>33</sup> May is troubled that she can no longer satisfy Benton's large sexual appetite. She would masturbate him, but "his scruples" do not allow for that.<sup>34</sup> May thinks, in an excellent summary of how progress and propriety have changed people's response to the West, "Come down to it, women took nature for what it was; by word if not by steady deed, men tried to make it unworldly."<sup>35</sup>

The couple down the road from the Collingsworths are the Pikes. The Pikes are drunkards, and they fight a lot. One winter evening, Benton and May can hear the Pikes fighting. Mrs. Pike comes to the Collingsworths to seek shelter from her husband who wants to beat her. Benton refuses to allow the woman in because she is drunk (another example of caste determined by morality). May, horrified by Benton's blatant lack of compassion, rushes after Mrs. Pike, yelling for her to come back. May slips on the ice, falls, and begins labor. The child is saved but May is lost. The doctor confronts Benton with the question of how many times he had made May pregnant and how many wives his father had. Benton answers and then the doctor strongly lets Benton know that he just plain wore May out. Stunned, Benton retreats to his educated propriety and stoicism. But the biggest blow is yet to come.

The wake is held in the house, and Eva Fox, who has since closed down her brothel and bought out Soo Son's restaurant (again Guthrie's subtle way of showing the changing

times), has sent two loaves of bread as a token of her sympathy to add to the growing amount of food sent by other townspeople. When Benton finds out from whom the bread has come, he demands that it be thrown out. His picket fence morality will not allow him to recognize the ex-madam's sympathy and gratitude for all that he has done for Arfive. Collingsworth then gets the truth of it from his own daughter. She says, "You're small and you're mean . . . plain, simple mean. Poor Mother."<sup>36</sup> Benton sobs, a natural act, but it is too late.

The frontier has met the twentieth century and found it wanting. But perhaps that is not exactly the case. What is found wanting is the hypocrisy that civilization brings, the suppression of the natural man in the name of righteousness and prosperity. Benton's loss is much greater than that of Boone Caudill's or Lat Evans's. For Boone the loss can only be felt; it will never be understood nor will he ever be aware of just how important a part he played in his own suffering: Lat Evans's loss was the result of an arbitrary decision, the putting of commercial and social success ahead of moral obligations. But Benton Collingsworth's loss has been his whole way of life. Everything he stood for, everything he embodied, has helped destroy what he loved and held dear. In this he is much like Boone, but unlike Boone, Benton is intimately aware of the extent of his loss. His lack of compassion and brotherhood toward his fellow man is enough to remove him from humankind and make him that which he has so often railed against.

Benton Collingsworth not only fills the role of central figure in this book, but as Joe Hairston says, that of symbol as well. "Guthrie makes it clear that Collingsworth's dilemma is not private but rather that of the changing society in the town."<sup>37</sup> Whereas before, with Lat Evans, it was the problem of only one man, now the problem concerns everyone and Benton is just a manifestation of it. The whole town cannot seem to realize that propriety is not necessarily goodness. Benton's unbending moralism is manifested throughout the town's attitudes toward its inhabitants. From the curtain in Soo Son's restaurant which separates Eva Fox's girls from the more "righteous" patrons, to one of those "righteous" patrons displaying Margaret Carson's dildo in the local saloon, Arfive is a town with a serious case of hypocrisy. Birth into the twentieth century, the growth of the population, and the attempt to enlarge the community and make it more prosperous cannot be accomplished without a more complex, and non-hypocritical, morality to adjust for the natural human quirks which exist in the race.

In the heart of a political democracy lives a moral tyranny which Benton Collingsworth symbolizes. This incongruity, plus the fact that one societally sanctioned moral system is hypocritical, leads to the pain and suffering endured by the people in Arfive. The old West is dead; no longer are a man and a woman accepted for what they are. Now they can be anything they want to be, just as long as, if they want to be accepted, they appear the way the town

morality wants them to appear. The West is won, but the freedom of the wilderness is lost, lost in fact, in mind, and in spirit. The West is lost to the general population in much the same way it was lost, on an individual level, to Boone and Benton. Because their character was their fate, Boone and Benton and the town of Arfive lost something valuable. Benton Collingsworth, as a symbol and as an educated man, is capable of verbalizing and finally seeing, albeit after being battered with the truth by his own daughter, the loss that has taken place. For Benton the loss is personal, but by extension the loss is shared by all. Too many people wanted too much and in ways that were just not fitted to the natural scheme of things; that communion with the spirit of the wilderness is lost.

Yet Arfive ends on a note of hope as Juliet tells Mort that she is pregnant by him. Mort, this last remnant of the old ways, is still fertile, still vital and alive, but he is only one among many, and besides, he doesn't live in town, he lives on his ranch.

Guthrie has come a long way from the fur-trapping days of the 1830's. Arfive is the most urban of any of the first four books (if the tiny community can be called urban), and after the first two historically grounded novels, Guthrie has come to find his subject and his artistic style. Martha Scott Trimble accurately describes his style in Arfive when she says, "He paints with the deft Japanese brushstroke,"<sup>38</sup> more like the eternal wind and vast distance of the plains



than the lush sentimental prose of The Big Sky.

While the old conventional Western Myth, with its ". . . elemental conflict between the personified forces of Good and Evil . . ." which, as John Williams claims, evokes a response because it appeals to the Calvinistic habit of mind in all of us,<sup>39</sup> does not appear in Guthrie, it is because Guthrie does not write within the narrow confines of that stereotyped myth. For Guthrie, the ". . . line of demarcation between good guys and bad guys is so fine as to be barely distinguishable."<sup>40</sup> If there is such a thing as a villain in Guthrie, it is more likely that it is that Calvinistic habit of mind, that picket fence morality, that hypocritical propriety in which ". . . a man got damned for actin' like a man" and where men tried to make what was natural, "unworldly."<sup>41</sup>

One of Guthrie's themes is now fully developed. It is the need for people and the need for communication. As Joe Hairston said in 1973, before the fifth book was written:

The point of the tetralogy is clear enough: though a Guthrie character,--and Guthrie himself for that matter--may look wistfully at the far horizon, his salvation as a human being depends upon his participation in the community of mankind.<sup>42</sup>

And so the land continues; it changes with each season yet remains the same. Men and women come and go, yet the West remains, changed, but still the single most powerful presence. The environment has defeated no one; those who have fallen, somehow suffered, or have become spiritually bankrupt have done so through no fault of the land. The imperfection is not in the land, probably not even in the inaccurate vision



of the West; rather, the imperfection lies in those that have the vision, and thus, due to their imperfection, they realize a tainted dream, an impaired vision, and an incomplete existence.

The final book, The Last Valley, comes in 1975. Guthrie had said, in 1972, in his paper delivered at the seventh annual meeting of the Western Literature Association at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and printed in Western American Literature, that, "My novels have been cast in a time known as the winning of the west. If I live to write another, it will be about the saving of it."<sup>43</sup> The Last Valley is that book, or more accurately, it is Guthrie's swan song, a winding down end to the pentology. In many ways it is an unfortunate book, as it lacks the precision and subtlety that signified Arfive and the spiritual grandeur which was evidenced in The Big Sky. Structurally, The Last Valley is a simple, almost obvious book. Cast in three parts, it is too episodic, and the leaps between the parts are so great that it appears to be three novellas rather than a thematically continuous novel.<sup>44</sup> Arfive was also an episodic book and had such leaps, but Arfive was held together by the theme being interwoven into every scene. Yet The Last Valley is still pure Guthrie, and that may be its major fault. Reading The Last Valley gives a sense of reading Guthrie himself, the Guthrie of The Blue Hen's Chick, not Guthrie the artist.

The usual Guthrie signs are present. The mentor-student relationship exists as Guthrie, continuing on with

a number of the characters from Arfive, has Mort Ewing and Macalester Cleveland instruct young Ben Tate on the finer points of doing the truly right thing in the community of Arfive. The Guthrie Brothers are also present as Ben starts out as a minor adversary to Frank Brobeck, but the two men soon become fast friends, much in the mold of Benton Collingsworth and Mort Ewing. The Guthrie Fight is here when Ben single-handedly apprehends the murderer of one of the town's most beloved citizens.

But despite Guthrie's ability to write well, this last book just doesn't seem to have the artistic commitment of Arfive. The symbolic scenes are forced, artificial. When Macalester Cleveland rises up to repudiate the right-wing speaker, McBride, the speech lacks the force of the other utterances of Guthrie's characters when they have stood to speak. Macalester says all the right things, but this scene is too set-up, too obvious, so that the impact is not one of right triumphing over wrong but of a cliché, a saving, last minute, verbal cavalry charge.

Likewise, the scene where Jap York meets his death also lacks the strength to properly support the weight of the symbolic coup de grâ<sup>^</sup>ce to an era. York, the only natural man (he is a guide) in the book and the fictional descendant of Dick Summers, is killed by a wounded grizzly, a grizzly which had been shot by a man without the courage to go and look for the wounded animal and finish it off. York takes Ben Tate with him to look for the raging bear, even though

Ben only has a "light" small caliber rifle.<sup>45</sup> When they flush the bear, the wounded animal charges at Ben. York shoots it and the bear veers for York. York's gun jams and Ben puts two rounds into the bear and runs out of ammunition as the bruin reaches York. The grizzly mauls York and Ben rushes up and breaks his rifle over the bear's skull. York yells for Ben to run for it and save himself. Ben runs; there is nothing else he can do. When Ben and the other men return, both York and the bear are dead. Only Brobeck is aware of Ben's courage during the emergency. The only dangerous mythic animal deity on the continent has killed the only man in the book who embodies the old ways and has in turn been killed by the old frontier courage and skills with a slight aid from modern courage which is just not as heavy a caliber as the old-time courage was. Ben's rifle is a "light" one, carried for appearances because he didn't want to kill anything. Once again in Guthrie, the pose of appearance has caused harm.

There is no longer any trace of the mountain man hero from the wilderness fiction. That man lies dead beneath an animal which symbolizes a spirit and times equally dead. How different this is from a similar incident which Dick Summers remembers in The Way West.<sup>46</sup> When Dick returns again to the Green, he remembers that once, while trapping, a grizzly charged him and he was able to get his shot into it before the bear bowled him over. Underneath the bear he struggled for his knife, but it was unnecessary. The bear was dead; his ball had torn through the heart. If only York's or Ben's

shot could have been as true. But in this final valley, nothing is the way it was. It all seems really obvious, but Guthrie has to have Brobeck say about York and the bear, "In a way it is fitting. Two of a kind, you might say."<sup>47</sup> This making sure that the meaning is clear is painful after the more skillful work in the first four novels.

This is a difficult book to place in the Guthrie pentology. Guthrie has stayed with his town of Arfive and many of the characters from that book. He has added some new ones, mainly Ben Tate, around whom the story is wound, Macalester, the adult Mary Jess Collingsworth, and Mattie Murchison. Yet the sense of uneasiness in this book, the heaviness of Guthrie's hand, seems to indicate that this should have been a collection of essays instead of a novel, because Guthrie is attempting to put so much into it. The authorial intrusion is ever present as Guthrie projects himself into the book through the truisms, maxims, and observations which come from Mort, Macalester, Benton, and even Ben. In the past, usually just one character, the mentor, spoke for Guthrie, but in The Last Valley, many do. Perhaps Guthrie felt, as the years have started to accumulate, that this would be his last major work, his last chance to explain, communicate, and understand his relationship to the big sky country. The last word of The Last Valley is "home."

After the flood in part three, the symbolic death and rebirth of Arfive, Ben goes to see Mattie and she tells him about their love child. This is Mike, the good kid who reminds



Ben of himself when he was younger and who talks to him as he used to talk with Macalester Cleveland. Thus, the organic chain remains unbroken. The line of midwives for the town's continuous birth into the future is assured. And that unbroken chain, if anything, is the main theme of this book, the passing of the torch and the maintaining of that organic chain of human dignity, of that small, humble greatness which infuses in some people and which helped make the West, and America, the places that they are. There could only be one Lincoln, one Roosevelt. Likewise, there could only be one Boone Caudill and one Dick Summers. But there are probably thousands of Mort Ewings, Ben Tates, and even Benton Collingsworths (not to forget the Mattie Murchisons, May Collingsworths, Callie Kashes, and Eva Foxes) and though their contributions are seldom celebrated, the country never could have succeeded without them.

They are Guthrie's democratic heroes; he writes for them, tells their story, shows their dignity and their suffering, and describes how, when the times demand a man to stand, men like these will stand. (The phrase: "a man could stand up for improvement and sit down for reform" echoes throughout Arfive, chiding that particular tenet of picket fence morality.<sup>48)</sup> Guthrie's heroes, the small men standing strong, in a way form their own myth in the Guthrie pentology. As Guthrie himself has said:

We have enough creators of idols, who make one admirable quality the sum of man; not enough honest appraisers who recognize that a part of all heroes is the clay common to all of us.<sup>49)</sup>



Guthrie's heroes all have blemishes, but they usually manage to conduct themselves in the proper manner when it counts, especially if the fate of the larger group is at stake. If they don't act properly, it's usually they themselves who suffer. As Delbert Wylder comments while discussing how well-rounded Guthrie's characters are: "He is charitable always toward their human, thus limited, capabilities."<sup>50</sup>

Thus the pentology ends with a novel whose art is questionable but whose attitudes and espousals are impeccable. Guthrie can be forgiven for an effort which is not quite up to par, for he has traveled a long fictional road. The titles of the books themselves tell the story. From The Big Sky to The Way West to These Thousand Hills, all are visions of large scope, of promise, of potential. Yet each title is a somewhat smaller vision than the one before it. They go from the all-encompassing sky to a vast but definable region to a finite number of hills. Then the fourth book's title is the name of a small town, and that name is taken from an old brand symbolizing an already worn out West. Finally there is The Last Valley, the name clear in itself.

The five novels are a tale which began with the myth of the garden and ended with the making of a society. The first two books, those most absolutely grounded in history, are faithful renderings of now legendary times. The lack of population characteristic of wilderness fiction is remedied in The Way West. There Guthrie learned that if there is a society there is more of a story. But that was an artificial and

transient society, and it is not until These Thousand Hills that Guthrie begins to ask the questions which civilization raises. These Thousand Hills may seem a bit like a morality play, but it sets the tone for what is to follow. Guthrie has his subject and he writes what he knows. In Arfive he shows a glimpse of the national psyche, of those inexact qualities which make small men great and great men common to us all. And if The Last Valley is a weak good-bye, it can be excused.

Guthrie has written five novels about the West. He has been consistent in his vision, insightful, and has managed to thread all five books together in an organic historic sequence, following the death of one era with the birth of another. Only one thing remains constant in a world where life is a transient journey, as Dick Summers observed:

. . . it was only the earth that didn't change. It was just the mountains, watching others flower and seed, watching men come and go, the Indian first and after him the trapper, pushing up the unspoiled rivers, pleased with risk and loneliness, and now the wanters of new homes, the hunters of fortune, the would-be makers of a bigger nation, spelling the end to a time that was ended anyway.<sup>51</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Harvey Breit, "A Talk with A. B. Guthrie, Jr.," New York Times Book Review, 23 October 1949, p. 39; and Eloise Perry Hazard, "First Novelists of 1947," Saturday Review of Literature, 14 February 1948, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Louie W. Attenberg, "The American West and the Archetypal Orphan," Western American Literature 5 (Fall 1970): p. 211; James K. Folsom, The American Western Novel (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press Services, Inc., 1966), p. 66; Frank Goodwyn, "The Frontier in American Fiction," Inter-American Review of Bibliography 10 (1960): p. 359; Margaret Marshall, review of The Big Sky, by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., in The Nation, 24 May 1947, p. 632; Allan Nivens, "Wild Mountain Melody," The Saturday Review of Literature, 3 May 1947, p. 9; and Orville Prescott, In My Opinion (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1952), pp. 141-142.

<sup>3</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big Sky (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947; Sentry Edition, 1965), pp. 193-194. Here Guthrie has Summers give thumbnail sketches of Boone and Jim, comment on the changing frontier, and reflect upon his advancing years.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Astro, "The Big Sky and the Limits of Wilderness Fiction," Western American Literature 9 (Summer 1974): p. 107.

<sup>5</sup>The Big Sky, pp. 121-122.

<sup>6</sup>Astro, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup>Astro, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup>The Big Sky, p. 386.

<sup>9</sup>Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 105; Jackson K. Putnam, "Down to Earth: A. B. Guthrie's Quest for Moral and Historical Truth," North Dakota Quarterly 39 (Summer 1971): p. 50; Marshall, p. 632; Nivens, p. 9; and Prescott, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup>The Big Sky, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., "The Historical Novel," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 51.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Gorham Davis, "In the Western Country," New York Times Book Review, 9 October 1949, p. 5; Nicholas J. Karolides, The Pioneer in the American Novel 1900-1950 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 68; Dayton Kohler, "A. B. Guthrie, Jr. and the West," College English 12 (February 1951): p. 255; and Prescott, pp. 143-144.

<sup>13</sup>Goodwyn, p. 359.

<sup>14</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr. The Way West (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), p. 221.

<sup>15</sup>Joe B. Hairston, "Community in the West," South Dakota Review 2 (Spring 1973): p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>The Big Sky, p. 194.

<sup>17</sup>David C. Stineback, "On History and Its Consequences: A. B. Guthrie's These Thousand Hills," Western American Literature 6 (Fall 1971): p. 178.

<sup>18</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., These Thousand Hills (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), p. 42.

<sup>19</sup>These Thousand Hills, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup>These Thousand Hills, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup>These Thousand Hills, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup>Stineback, p. 185.

<sup>23</sup>Hairston, p. 23; and Stineback, p. 188.

<sup>24</sup>Walter Van Tilburg Clark, "When Settlers Began To Take Over," New York Times Book Review, 18 November 1956, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>Stineback, p. 183.

<sup>26</sup>Stineback, p. 185.

<sup>27</sup>At least three establishments are common to both town names: McCabe's Stable, Arfive p. 23 and These Thousand Hills p. 213; The Family Liquor Store, Arfive p. 10 and These Thousand Hills p. 234; and Soo Son's, Arfive p. 9 and These Thousand Hills p. 238.

<sup>28</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965), pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Arfive (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), p. 131.



<sup>30</sup>Arfive, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup>Hairston, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup>Arfive, p. 190.

<sup>33</sup>Guthrie's own mother bore nine children, with only three of them living to maturity, The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 13. Arfive is obviously autobiographical in many respects, but except for the general similarity, the fidelity of Arfive, especially in attitude, to Guthrie's past is difficult to determine.

<sup>34</sup>Arfive, p. 262.

<sup>35</sup>Arfive, p. 262.

<sup>36</sup>Arfive, p. 276.

<sup>37</sup>Hairston, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup>Martha Scott Trimble, review of Arfive, by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., in Western American Literature 6 (Summer 1971): p. 159.

<sup>39</sup>John Williams, "The Western: Definition of the Myth," The Nation, 18 November 1961, p. 402.

<sup>40</sup>Trimble, p. 159.

<sup>41</sup>These Thousand Hills, p. 215; and Arfive, p. 262.

<sup>42</sup>Hairston, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., "Why Write About the West," Western American Literature 7 (Fall 1972): p. 169.

<sup>44</sup>Delbert E. Wylder disagrees with my judgment here. In his review of The Last Valley in Western American Literature 11 (August 1976): p. 177, he says that The Last Valley is much better structured than Arfive.

<sup>45</sup>A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Last Valley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975), p. 157.

<sup>46</sup>The Way West, pp. 219-220.

<sup>47</sup>The Last Valley, p. 175.

<sup>48</sup>Arfive, p. 50.

<sup>49</sup>Guthrie, in Haslam's Western Writing, p. 50.



<sup>50</sup>Wylder, p. 177.

<sup>51</sup>The Way West, p. 217.

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