
“Damned Blue Stuff” An Appreciation of Clark C. Spence

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In an essay on mining historiography published in *Historians in the American West*, Clark Spence commented that the history of the mineral industry in the West had been obscured by the public’s fascination with 49ers, grizzled prospectors, and rowdy mining camps. Like Nevada miners, he suggested, readers looked for gold while cursing the “damned blue stuff.” When the essays were completed, the “blue stuff” proved to be valuable deposits of silver that generated wealth for the region and the nation. This story of the silver strike is well known among mining historians, and Clark’s reference was easily understood. It seems appropriate, then, to recall it again to appreciate the value of his non-mining studies and their importance to the historiography of agriculture and of the western experience.¹

It is a body of work that encompasses Montana’s territorial politics and celebrates that state’s history, explains the implementation of steam cultivation in Great Britain, recounts the story of Salvation Army farm colonies, and follows the path of rainmakers in their attempts to bring moisture to dry lands. As in his mining histories, he has an affinity for topics that involve technology, a scientific context, and economic factors. In many ways, Clark has been attracted to offbeat subjects, but in every case his projects are about people. While he loves to describe their eccentricities, he reminds us that not every historical actor fulfills a Turnerian or Hollywood image of a western hero.

Before enrolling in the Ph.D. program at the University of Illinois to study with Clark, my first

connection to his writings was an article, “Canines to Canaan: The Story of Some Forgotten Four-footed Pioneers,” that appeared in *American Heritage*. The essay was relevant to my master’s thesis, which examined novels pertaining to the Oregon Trail migrations, because one—Delia Morris Stephenson’s book for juveniles, *Dog of the Pioneer Trail*—focused on the dogs of a wagon train. Despite its significance to my study, the article seemed somewhat frivolous, so one of the first things I asked Clark was why he had written it. While I don’t remember his exact words, his message was clear: the project had been fun. From the tongue-in-cheek alliteration of the title to his insistence that historians had ignored the important role of dogs along the emigrant trails, the essay characterizes Clark’s personality and his approach to his profession. He displays his dry and somewhat impish humor and, while he offers a serious thesis, his style appears as light and bouncy as his stride when walking to his office in Gregory Hall. He imparted a belief that historical research and writing should pique one’s interest, offer something new to readers and the profession, and be enjoyable to do. Historians should also remember ordinary people (and their pets)—“the little people with dirty faces,” he liked to say—who not only made history, but whose humanity made it worth studying.²

It should not be surprising that in his presidential address to the Western Historical Association in 1970, Clark skipped the usual discussion about the state of western history and spoke instead about the exploits and travels of hoboes

and tramps. These "Knights of the Fast Freight" held a kinship with other western heroes; they were restless, adventurous, independent, and, if the railroad bull failed in his job, extremely mobile. As participants in history, Clark noted, "the hobo was important to the West precisely because he was a laboring man. . . . He was one of the real builders of the West." Hoboes acted as a migratory labor force available to serve many masters. They might find jobs picking apples in one state and harvesting wheat in another; they worked in logging camps, in mines, and, somewhat ironically, on railroad section gangs. But, as mechanization reduced the need for itinerant workers and automobiles supplanted rail traffic, hoboes faded from the western landscape along with "the steam locomotive itself," each becoming, like mountain men and cowboys, "romantic relics of the historic past."³

Historians of the post-World War II generation, like Clark, challenged the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner and its dominating hold on American historical thought. They recognized the romantic image of the West, but rejected the simplicity of Turner's message—its emphasis on process, its celebration of individualism, and its conclusions about American exceptionalism. Instead, these revisionists—like the apostles of the New Western history who followed—focused on the West as a region and presented a complex telling of its history. Their topics included the impact of transportation networks, the influence of eastern bankers and foreign investors, and the ever-present role of the federal government. Clark's scholarship contributed to those changing assessments, beginning with his *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier, 1860-1901*, recipient of the Beveridge Prize from the American Historical Association. His arguments and approach were no doubt influenced and encouraged by his undergraduate professor at the University of Colorado, Robert G. Athearn, one of the principal proponents of this post-war revisionism, and

Ernest S. Osgood, his dissertation advisor at the University of Minnesota, whose 1929 work on the ranching industry set the standard for scholarly studies on this and other western subjects.⁴

Soon after the successful reception of *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier*, Clark turned to an agricultural topic set in the British Isles and produced another award-winning monograph, *God Speed the Plow: The Coming of Steam Cultivation to Great Britain*. He notes in the book's preface that his interest in agricultural steam engines began "as a farm boy in Idaho," and that from that vantage point, "there was something majestic about these clanking monsters as they went puffing along, sending forth great clouds of black smoke and tearing up the dry earth in long lines behind them." But before the reader can imagine a rosy picture of western farm life, Clark adds that his interest in agriculture has been practiced "from a safe and pedagogical distance." And the result is a clear and instructive narrative about technological innovation and the successful adaptation of steam machinery. The book is thoroughly researched and demonstrates Clark's deft handling of technical information that appears in his other writings.⁵

This is certainly true of *The Rainmakers: American "Pluiculture" to World War II*. Inspired by a discussion on rainmaking in Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains*, Clark's work not only displays his skill in describing material unfamiliar to most readers, but his affinity for finding history's rogues and charlatans. Any mention of rainmakers today conjures up images of slick-talking strangers whose methods are closer to alchemy than to science, but the era from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth was one of technical and scientific progress, and people held great hope that anything could be achieved and all problems solved. For farmers facing drought conditions and financial loss, a rainmaker's promise seemed more bankable than a dying crop. As a result, the country "experienced the gamut of rainmaking proposals, from

the absurd to the plausible, from the nonsensical to the scientific, and from the innocent to the criminally fraudulent.” This spectrum of rainmaking schemes came from an equally broad group of individuals. Some were true scientists, like the meteorologist James P. Espy, while others were simply crackpots and frauds. One reviewer called this book “simultaneously judicious and entertaining,” which comes as no surprise. Clark’s work is always sound, fair, and presented in a vigorous, vivid style that is immensely readable.⁶

Among Clark’s early publications, and probably less familiar to western historians, is *The Sineus of American Capitalism: An Economic History*, a look at the development of the American economy from its colonial beginnings to the 1960s. Criticized for emphasizing economic history more than economics and for focusing on American economic development rather than considering a comparative approach, this book is less enduring than many of his others, but reflects the characteristics common in his scholarship. He underscores the roles of technology and transportation in advancing industry and commerce, and his recounting of this history is replete with anecdotes and quotations that give his writing a lively air. In fact, it is a good place to find material for classroom lectures, because he is mindful that historical figures with quirky, colorful personalities are appealing. As a teacher, Clark certainly shared those stories with his students, and it was a lesson worth remembering.⁷

In a third book related to agriculture, *The Salvation Army Farm Colonies*, Clark again demonstrated his fine scholarship. Called a “major contribution to the literature of self-help,” the book describes efforts by Frederick Booth-Tucker, commander of the Salvation Army in the United States, to help poor families revitalize their lives by establishing them on farms away from urban areas. With cities increasing in size and with the prevalence of economic hard times following the Panic of 1893, Salvationists fol-

lowed the model of earlier utopian communities in the United States and sought rural and western settings to create their farm colonies. Booth-Tucker described his plan in a frequently-given speech entitled “The Landless Man to the Manless Land,” in which he evoked the common belief that the West held regenerative powers. Of the sites, Fort Herrick in Ohio eventually became a haven for alcoholics seeking recovery, while Fort Romie, California, and Fort Amity, Colorado, experienced success and hardship. Colonists in both of the latter locations managed to acquire title to farmsteads, but those in California faced a succession of droughts, and increased salinity contaminated Fort Amity’s irrigation system. This story is significant for showing how Americans saw the West as a panacea to resolve their problems, while at the same time it dispels popular perceptions about individuals easily taming the land. For example, the Salvation Army saw the West as a safety valve for urban populations, yet they understood that their experiment would fail without broad-based support—specifically financial backing and federal involvement. In describing these colonies, Clark takes an obscure and seemingly minor topic and offers an instructive and meaningful portrayal of the American West.⁸

Since World War II, historians have undertaken studies of territorial politics and governance in the West. The federal government held jurisdiction over western lands, and it established the territorial system to encourage settlement, provide governmental structure, and, at the same time, treat the burgeoning western populations as citizens, not colonists. The result, however, was often a struggle between local desires and federal designs. Territorial governors, for example, often found themselves aligned with the opposite political party from the one dominating a region, and partisan squabbling intensified over competing economic interests, questions about Indian policy, and the pursuit of statehood. Among the books describing such

conflicts, a few stand out as examples for others to follow. Howard R. Lamar's *Dakota Territory, 1861-1889: A Study in Frontier Politics* and his *The Far Southwest* could be cited first, followed by Lewis Gould's *Wyoming: A Political History, 1868-1912* and Robert W. Larson's *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846-1912*.⁹

In 1975, Clark joined this list with his influential and highly praised work, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89*. Discussing this historiography, Kenneth N. Owens said Clark's book created a "new standard" for the study of government in the West because it combined "political narrative with a clear, detailed analysis of the local territorial administration, its operations and its costs and benefits in this one western locale." Such laudatory comments are hardly surprising; the book contains all of the elements associated with Clark's scholarship. It is well researched, insightful, even handed, and entertaining.¹⁰

Clark followed up his territorial history of Montana with a general history of the state to celebrate the nation's bicentennial. Entitled simply, *Montana: A Bicentennial History*, it provides a

chronological rendering of Montana's story. The book benefits from Clark's broad knowledge of western history, and his specific expertise concerning Montana's territorial politics, the state's important mining heritage, and its development during the twentieth century. It is a testimony to his place among historians of the American West that he was selected to write this book.¹¹

Throughout his career, Clark has been a model for his graduate students and other scholars, not only historians who study mining or the West, but in the profession as a whole. As a teacher, he evinced the same intelligence and wry humor that has defined his written work, and so his influence has affected a student audience that extended beyond the seminar room. And of his former students, both undergraduate and graduate, I doubt that I am the only one trying to emulate his methods in the classroom. But while it is impossible to follow the exact trace he has traveled, he has provided direction, pointed most of us westward, and inspired us to mark our own trails. For that, and his patience, I am grateful. ■

Spence Doctoral Students:

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Notes:

1. Clark C. Spence, "Western Mining," in Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 96.
2. Spence, "Canines to Canaan: The Story of Some Forgotten Four-footed Pioneers," *American Heritage* 32 (February-March 1981): 58-64. A similar version is in Spence, "Pioneers with Wagging Tails: Dogs on the Trail to Oregon," *Idaho Yesterdays: A Journal of the Idaho State Historical Society* 25 (Summer 1981): 27-31. Delia Morris Stephenson, *Dog of the Pioneer Trail* (Portland: Metropolitan Press, 1937). John Thomas Murphy, "In a Perfect Oregon Fever: Myth and Symbol in the Oregon Trail Novel" (Master's Thesis, Northern Arizona University, 1981).
3. Spence, "Knights of the Fast Freight," *American Heritage* 27 (August 1976): 93, 97. A similar version is in Spence, "Knights of the Tie and Rail: Tramps and Hoboes in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1971): 4-19.
4. Spence, *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier, 1860-1901* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958). Brian W. Dippie, "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives," in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, Charles E. Rankin (eds.),

- Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 112-36. Robert G. Athearn's works include *Westward the Briton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (1956; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); *Union Pacific Country* (1971; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976). Ernest S. Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1929).
5. Spence, *God Speed the Plow: The Coming of Steam Cultivation to Great Britain* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), vii.
 6. Spence, *The Rainmakers: American "Pluviculture" to World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 4. Robert C. Post, Review of *The Rainmakers: American "Pluviculture" to World War II*, by Clark C. Spence, in *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 431. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), 375-82.
 7. Spence, *The Sinews of American Capitalism: An Economic History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964). Stuart Bruchey, Review of *The Sinews of American Capitalism: An Economic History*, by Clark C. Spence, in *Journal of Economic History* 26 (March 1966): 133-34.
 8. Spence, *The Salvation Army Farm Colonies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985). H. Roger Grant, Review of *The Salvation Army Farm Colonies*, by Clark C. Spence, in *Journal of American History* 73 (March 1987): 1056.
 9. Howard R. Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861-1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956). Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). Lewis Gould, *Wyoming: A Political History, 1868-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). Robert W. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846-1912* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968).
 10. Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975). Kenneth N. Owens, "Government and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century West," in Michael P. Malone (ed.), *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 156.
 11. Spence, *Montana: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).