



The Insta-Facebook West

Do you “LIKE” it? By Jim Stiles

One of my favorite poet/songwriters, Utah Phillips, once wrote:

*I'll sing about an emptiness the East has
never known,
Where coyotes don't pay taxes and a man
can live alone.
And you've got to walk forever just to find
a telephone.
It's sad, but the tellin' takes me home.*

The West was and is and should always be about silence and space. Lots of it. About endless landscapes that stretch to infinity, and skies so vast and unbroken that they defy description, and moments of such incredible beauty and clarity that you think you'll burst

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Sometimes no news came
at all. And legends began.**

if you don't share this extraordinary moment with someone right now.

And what makes the West so special is that you can't.

The West has always been about remoteness and unimagined quiet, and sometimes it made us crazy trying to decide if we loved it for its solitude or loathed it for its isolation. We really did have to walk forever to find a telephone. No one can truly know the West and love the West without also hating it. But it was the West's unforgiving nature that also made us feel stronger. We chose to live here with all its emptiness and hardship and unforgiving space. Somehow being able to survive the West on its terms gave us a leg up on the world.

Still, the West overwhelmed us and filled us with unbridled joy and crushing loneliness, all at once. Like a bear hug from the

universe, we'd stand on the summit of a favorite peak or stretch out on our backs in the middle of a desert valley and for a moment we'd almost be giddy. This, we said, is pure unadulterated joy!

And then the silence would sweep over us and we'd search for some sign that we aren't as insignificant as we feel, and we couldn't find it. We'd look around and think—it's so...big. And suddenly our laughter would sound like the hollow giggles of a madman let loose in a coliseum and we'd start to cry. Because this is as good and as bad as it gets. And we feel so alone and we want to tell someone. We want to hear a voice. But we can't. Because this is the West—the big, hard, breathtaking, heart-breaking, unrelenting, unforgiving American West. Or at least, it was...

It can be fairly argued that the demise of the “Old West” has been a century-long lament. Ever since John Fremont rediscovered South Pass and James W. Marshall found gold at Sutter's Mill, the pristine West has been chopped and whittled and reshaped by its conquerors, and, for those of us who still suggest there is something more to be lost, our laments increasingly fall upon deaf ears. The truth is, most of us like the “New West.” Or, to be more precise, we “LIKE” it.

This is fast becoming the “Facebook West,” where a man never looks for a telephone and where no one ever needs (or wants) to be alone. Where you can bring the world to your favorite “lonely spot.” Or at least your “friends.” And maybe even your “friends of friends.” Facebook is just a click away from the most remote places on Earth.

I've always wished I talked less and listened more, but the world today has little use for the archetypal westerner—that laconic, taciturn individual who only spoke when he had something worth hearing, and maybe not even then. Nobody measures their words now. It goes from brain to keyboard to everyone. The Facebook West is strikingly similar to the rest of the world.

Facebook has grown to a billion members in just a few years and its homogeneity—its *sameness*—is stunning. Nobody is ever out of touch. No personal thought is

Dry Wash and Courthouse Towers
at Arches National Park in Utah.
© David Muench



ABOVE: Traffic congestion at the Arches National Park entrance station is from its traffic cam. CENTER: Jim Stiles' image for "Facebook West."
 BOTTOM: The crowds at Horseshoe Bend.

ever too intimate.

A century and more ago, early travelers to the West disappeared for months or even years. Friends and family waited for news, and when it came the letters were cherished relics. Sometimes no news came at all. And legends began.

As a 19-year-old wandering the West for the first time so many years ago, I was gone for three months. It felt like longer. I'd never felt so far away. Before I left home, my grandpa gave me a stack of preaddressed postcards. "Send me one a week," he said. When I came home safe and sound, my cards sat in a stack on the kitchen table where he had read and reread them each morning.

Today, a traveler to the West posts hourly updates. Tonight's sunset? It's just too lovely not to "SHARE." Post it on the News Feed.

You just got a sense of your own immortality? Please tell the world.

We "LIKE" this.

You're in Durango or Sedona or Flagstaff or Taos and you have a taste for Thai tonight? Post your culinary desires and someone out there will help you satisfy that hunger.

The West's icons—its landscapes and its heroes—are celebrated in the Facebook West. It makes the perfect gallery for photographs because, after all, the medium is more visual than thought provoking. And many of the images are stunning. What often gives pause is the way its viewers embrace those images.



The world today has little use for the archetypal westerner—that iconic, taciturn individual who only spoke when he had something worth hearing, and maybe not even then.



As lovely as a photograph might be, it cannot be a substitute for the real thing and sometimes it's not clear if Facebookers know the difference.

Environmental heroes are honored by Facebook in its own inimitable way. The poet/conservationist John Muir can claim that 4,190 Facebook users "LIKE" him. Henry David Thoreau is embraced by 18,037 fans. Not bad for men who have been dead for decades or centuries.

Wendell Berry (who is still quite alive and kicking) has 4,616 fans, despite the fact that he doesn't own a computer and has, by choice and design, never logged onto the Internet.

On a page "to promote and discuss the writings and life of Edward Abbey," his role as a naturalist (one he loathed) usually trumps any serious discussion of Abbey's more controversial positions like immigration and his membership in the NRA. Occasionally a contributor to the Abbey page asks the question no one wants to consider: "What would Abbey think of Facebook?" The consensus is always that he would have hated it and then a swarm of Facebookers click the "LIKE" button.

Even Cactus Ed's assumed revulsion for the medium gets a "thumbs up" from its most ardent users and his most enthusiastic admirers. Nobody seems to notice the contradiction.

In the end, the Facebook West is coming

for us all. There is an inevitability about it now that I refused to consider even a few years ago. The banality that we've hoped to avoid is now perched on our shoulders and lulling us into submission. It's comforting to many. We get to be participants, even stars, in what passes for a public discussion in the 21st century.

And everything is public. A Facebooker recently chastised one of her "friends" for posting "inappropriate comments" on her wall. "Even if it doesn't offend me," she explained, "you never know who is in your audience." This is what Facebook is really about: We've become willing performers, playing to an "audience" full of "friends" who "LIKE" us. Andy Warhol and his "15 minutes" were spot on.

That explains, I suppose, our willingness to abandon the privacy we claim is so precious. We're asked to list our favorite books and we eagerly comply. Which great actor do we most resemble? We answer without hesitation. What car would we be? Why, the car that suits our personality, whether it's *Mucho Macho* or *New Age Sensitive*.

We unwittingly give the world every detail of our private lives, manufacturing a persona for ourselves in the process. And while we voluntarily spew all our details, somebody out there is taking notes, compiling our profiles, and we keep making their job easier.

"Yup" and "Nope" just wouldn't work in the Facebook West. This is no place to be reticent or understated. Gary Cooper wouldn't stand a chance.

Then it occurs to me. I lament the loss of the empty West and its remote and lonely vistas. I think of the cowboy, Jack, from "Lonely Are the Brave"—all alone, just him and his horse. And then I think of millions upon millions of solitary little figures, all around the West and the world, hunched over their various electronic devices in windowless rooms, wishing they were anywhere but where they are, furiously typing their most private thoughts to whomever will listen, and hoping that somebody will reply—that somebody will "LIKE" them.

And I think, *damn*, what could be lonelier than that? ■

Jim Stiles is the founding publisher of the Canyon Country Zephyr and the author of "Brave New West: Morphing Moab at the Speed of Greed." He is currently working on its sequel, "The Bears Ears Borg: Green Money, the Media, and the Assimilation of the American 'New' West."