



THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT, NEAR DUPUYER, BY JOHN LAMBING

HOW FREEDOM FEELS

By
**Chris
Madson**

Where I grew up, the streets were mostly public—except for that neighborhood on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi, the one with the gate and the limestone guardhouse. But, aside from that refuge for the wealthy, you could bike down any thoroughfare without asking permission or meeting stony stares from residents.

Off the road, it was a different matter. In town, the real estate was chopped up into half-acre lots, each little fiefdom carefully tended and jealously protected from interlopers, even 12-year-old boys. Maybe especially 12-year-old boys. Farther from town, the lots and houses got bigger. They often had a scrap of timber, a stretch of creek, sometimes

even a pond, all off-limits to strangers. Out in the country, the ground was given over to the intense production of crops, which must have been quite valuable, considering the care with which they had been fenced and posted. It was a landscape of boundaries.

This arrangement encouraged imagination. A kid could look over from the shoulder of the gravel road and wonder whether that pond had bluegill, whether the fringe of timber held a covey of quail or a cottontail. With the grass always greener on the other side of the fence, it was possible to believe that the cover over there was stiff with game, from squirrels to trophy whitetails. And there was never any risk of that illusion being shattered, since the chance of

an unknown kid getting access to one of those spots was slimmer than a redbone hound after coon season.

There came a time when my parents rounded up the kids and made the trek west for vacation. The trip was a revelation. Over those two weeks, we camped in a succession of national forests and Bureau of Land Management holdings where fences had no gates and the only boundary was the horizon. In all my years, I'd never had the chance to think so big, to let imagining run free and then—if I saw fit—to follow, just to see whether the world fit the dream. Often, it did.

In this, I did nothing more than follow the trails of the genera-

tions that preceded me—the waves of emigrants, the fur trappers, the French and Spanish explorers, and, before them all, the nomads following the great herds along the edge of the glaciers. A history of restlessness that spans continents and cultures, reaching back into the shadows of our beginning; the wondering inspired by the land beyond our reach and, then, the finding out.

This may be a broader metaphor that defines the human condition—I don't know. But having spent most of my adult life in the West, I'm pretty sure that, for some of us at least, it is literally true. Now and then, we need a place to stretch out, what Daniel Boone called "elbow room." People have long been drawn to the open spaces of the West, but as the press of our own numbers gathers around us, the value of landscapes without boundaries is beyond reckoning. In an increasingly crowded world, they remind us how freedom feels. 🐘

Wyoming writer Chris Madson recently retired after 30 years as editor of Wyoming Wildlife, where this essay first appeared.