

A SECOND NEW ENGLAND IN THE WEST: REAL OR IMAGINARY?

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Americans are always moving on.
It's an Old Spanish custom gone astray,
A sort of English fever I believe,
Or just a mere desire to take French leave,
I couldn't say. I couldn't really say
But when the whistle blows, they go away. ¹

One of the greatest of our "frontier" writers was Mark Twain. Perhaps the most "American" of Twain's characters is the immortal Huck Finn. Think of the frontier virtues he represents: youthfulness, honesty, common sense, equalitarianism, among others. Huck's words sum up the spirit of the literary frontier, if not the real frontier: "I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize [sic] me and I can't stand it."²

Nowhere do we see better the romantic, symbolic, lyrical essence of the West than in Hervey Allen's *The Forest and the Fort*. Here the American reorganized an old civilization; he reinvented society; he was back in the forest again; liberty was not just a dream or an idea--it was a state of nature to be lived in. A new America, almost a Turnerian America, had begun west of the Alleghenies.³

After spending two years touring the settlements of Ohio, D. Griffiths, an Englishman, wrote a book in 1835 giving directions to emigrants. His comments on the Western Reserve are particularly worth noting. Among the "New Settlements" of Ohio, he found the Reserve "the most eligible for agricultural emigrants." He named Cleaveland, Norwalk, Hudson, Ravenna, Warren, Jefferson, Mecca, and Elyria as flourishing villages which "answer the purpose of market-towns in England." At the mouths of the rivers, such as the Rocky, Black, and Vermillion, "may be seen clusters of neat frame houses, answering to an English wharf." He found the houses scattered, every man's house standing on his own farm, much as in England. But, he noted, "instead of the open country to which he has been accustomed, the Englishman feels as if he were imprisoned in woods." And if the houses along the road are only a quarter of a mile apart, the road is called a street; if three houses are close together, it is called a town. Finally, Griffiths, in his travels, only encountered one beggar, and that was a poor European, and he thought, "English emigrant, asking help by the way to her place of destination."⁴

James E. Davis and others have attacked the idealized portrait of western democracy. Davis concluded that pioneer traits in the early years of settlement resulted from selective migration, diverse origins of migration, scarce labor, low economic levels, and abundant land.⁵ George W. Knepper and Stewart H. Holbrook might add that New Englanders were also spurred by the evangelical-missionary zeal, the "Yankee spirit" for adventure, and, of course, all forms of "boosterism."⁶ Is it possible to make a generalization that might apply to all the pioneers who came to the Old Northwest? Probably not, but the Old Northwest certainly provides a new people in a new land and, thus, an interesting field for scholarly study.

Once the Indian threat had been removed and the Native American land title extinguished, the New Englanders moved westward to what many emigrants called "the second New England."