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High Country News

For people who care about the West

BOOKS AND ESSAYS SPECIAL ISSUE

Into the Low Country

Jared Farmer takes us to the forgotten lowland West. Page 16.

RECLAIMING THE LOW COUNTRY

Look at a map of the original "New West" — the transcontinental West of the post-Civil War period. It's easy to fixate on what we *don't* see. Big dams, open-pit mines, metropolises, freeways — none yet exist. National forests and parks and bombing ranges — not there.

On closer inspection, the outdated maps show something more: presences in the past that we seldom acknowledge as absences in the present. A phantom topography.

I'm talking about big blue blobs — the lost lakes of the lowland West. We are familiar with the reservoirs we built during the age of reclamation. We know the places we flooded. What about the places we drained?

How many of the drivers who take I-5 or CA-99 through the seemingly undifferentiated "Central Valley" realize that they traverse a self-contained drainage between Bakersfield and Fresno — the Tulare Basin? A basin that not long ago contained a lake that rivaled Lake Tahoe in surface area? Tulare Lake was a marshy refuge for migratory birds, endemic elk, even grizzlies. It vanished from maps after being drained of life and meaning. The lakebed became a cotton plantation.

On the opposite side of the Sierra Nevada, around the same time, flourishing Owens Lake became a ghostly salt flat after Los Angeles diverted its inflow into a pipeline. In Utah's West Desert, seasonal Sevier Lake became a permanent dry lake due to upstream diversions. In the lava-land of northeastern California, dike-builders and irrigators transformed Tule Lake from something large and round into something small and rectangular.

Due to the desiccation of these and other oases on the Pacific Flyway, the Salton Sea — the most spectacularly *un*natural lake in the West — became prime habitat in the 20th century. Today, birds can't live with — or without — this toxic sump. The Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge operates an incinerator for the periodic mass die-offs of waterfowl.

The wetland West also disappeared from Westerners' hearts and minds. Consider the Great Salt Lake: once a world-famous resort, a national curiosity, the American Dead Sea. Railroads built splendid bathing houses, none of which survive today. The "Greatest Snow on Earth" has replaced the Great Salt Lake as Utah's most celebrated feature. During the 2002 Olympics, the standard blimp's-eye-view of Salt Lake City showed downtown buildings backed by snowy peaks. For their part, city boosters did nothing to turn the world's gaze from the east to the west, from the mountains to the lake, from the high country to the low.

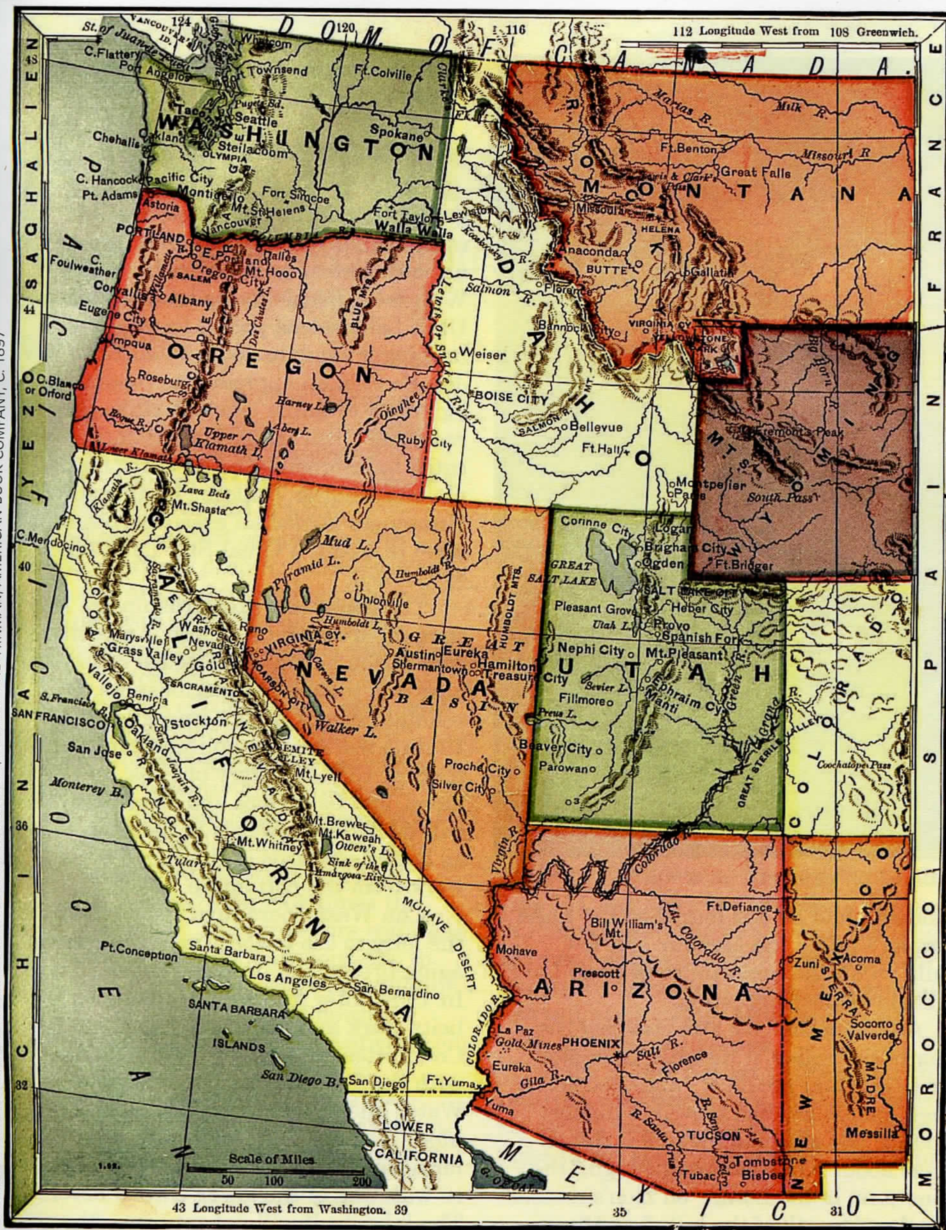
It may seem odd to call 4,200 feet — the historic average elevation of the Great Salt Lake — "low country." But in the Great Basin, that subregion of the West with no communication with the ocean, the low point of any local drainage is effectively sea level.

In relative terms, too, Utah's briny inland sea seems low next to the Wasatch Range. Six to seven thousand feet separate these contiguous yet disparate topographical features. In the minds of most modern Utahns, the supremacy of the high country seems obvious and natural. In 2006, the Utah Office of Tourism retired its long-running "Ski Utah" slogan, and inaugurated a new official tagline: "Life Elevated." When urban Utahns appeal to a bioregional identity, they speak of the "Wasatch Front," the "Intermountain West," or the "Rocky Mountain Region," never the Bonneville Basin, the eastern Great Basin, the Wasatch Oasis.

Here's the lowdown: Westerners have a high-country bias. We care more about vanishing glaciers than vanishing vernal pools. The endangered shortgrass prairie of Colorado's less-than-a-mile-high East Side gets no love compared to the 54 Fourteeners. There are highpointer clubs and peakbagging guides; what about the low points? Who has visited — or even counted — all of Nevada's playas?

IT WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS. Look at Utah: It used to be known as a land of lakes. In its original usage as a placename, "Utah" signified the lakeside home of the "Utahs" — the Lake Utes, also known as the Lagunas, the Lake People, the Fish-Eaters, or the Timpanogos, a

wens Lake, once a -square-mile lake fed by the Owens r, became a salty, y playa when the was diverted into os Angeles Aqueduct beginning in 913. Now it's the argest stationary ce of pollution in United States, its raveling as far as e Grand Canyon. MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES



USGENWEB ARCHIVES, FROM *NATURAL ELEMENTARY GEOGRAPHY*, REDWAY AND HINMAN, AMERICAN BOOK COMPANY, C. 1897

name drawn from the river where prodigious runs of cutthroat spawned.

The home of the Fish-Eaters was not the Great Salt Lake, but its freshwater feeder, Utah Lake, located 40 miles to the south in Utah Valley. A haven in a hard, inconstant land, the mouth of the Timpanogos (now the Provo) River hosted large semi-permanent villages and larger seasonal gatherings.

Outsiders coveted this rich, anomalous ecosystem. In 1776, Domínguez and Escalante praised the Lake of the Timpanogos in their expedition journal, and their cartographer wrote an effusive letter to the King of Spain. The lake could serve as the base for a new empire, he wrote, "because this place is the most pleasant, beautiful and fertile in all of New Spain."

The Spaniards never returned, but a later set of colonizers also understood the primacy of Utah Lake. In 1847, when Brigham Young chose the destination for his vanguard company, he settled for the *next*-best place. He "felt inclined for the present not to crowd upon the Utes" in their "choice lands" until the Latter-day Saints had "a chance to get acquainted with them and that it would be better to bear toward the region of the Salt Lake rather than the Utah."

Two years later, the Mormons felt sufficiently secure to start crowding southward. They wanted to turn the Lake Utes into commercial fishers as well as fishers for men. Within months, however, the two groups clashed over hunting and grazing rights. The "Indian war" of 1850 set the stage for subsequent conflict.

During the famine years of 1855-'56, the Utah Lake fishery saved local Mormons from starvation. The Fish-Eaters were not so fortunate. Settlers appropriated the best pasturage and fishing grounds, shut down the trade in slaves, and unwittingly introduced foreign diseases. In 1865, Ute leaders met with federal officials near the lake to sign a reservation treaty. The starving remnants of the Timpanogos people agreed to relocate to the Uinta Basin — a distant, lakeless region.

Without the Lake People, Utah Lake stopped being the Center Place. But the lake remained important to the second generation of settlers. The presence of water and fish still set the valley apart.

In the 20th century, though, Utah Lake was marginalized. Due to overfishing, unchecked irrigation and species introductions, the trout fishery degenerated into a carp pond. Then, during World War II, the federal government built a colossal steelworks on the shore. Thanks to Geneva Steel, the water acquired a reputation — not undeserved — for being a cesspool. As recreationists went elsewhere for fishing, boating and swimming, Utah Lake lost its centrality. By the end of the century, it was perceived as just one element of the valley, no longer its essence.

The shrunken status of Utah's eponymous lake was demonstrated in the 1960s when the Utah Travel Council divided the state into different tourist regions — "Color Country," "Castle Country," and so on. Utah County, which encompasses Utah Valley, which envelops Utah Lake, became known as "Mountainland."

In 1996, in conjunction with the state centennial, a newspaper ran the headline, "Timpanogos Has Always Dominated Utah Valley." The accompanying story had nothing to do with a lake or a river. It was all about a mountain.

MOUNT TIMPANOGOS, a limestone massif in the Wasatch Range, is by far the most loved, most hiked, most photographed, most talked-about mountain in contemporary Utah. Its attractions include a wilderness area, a scenic backway, a national monument (Timpanogos Cave) and a ski resort (Sundance). More than a million people live within 20 miles of this recreational magnet. In conversation, locals refer to the landmark by its endearing diminutive, "Timp."

The bonds of affection are strongest in Utah Valley — otherwise known as the Provo-Orem metropolitan area — where the mountain's name graces a hospital, three public schools, and a Mormon temple. Picture windows face north toward the rock face. Grandparents entertain their progeny with "Indian legends" about the landform.

"Timp" worship does not in fact go back to the Indians; it doesn't even go back to the pioneers. In the 19th century, people overlooked this landmark because they had no use for it. To settlers, it was just another long ridge in "the mountains," which even in the aggregate didn't merit recognition as Utah Valley's supreme feature. That distinction belonged to the lake.

What caused an unnamed mountainous space to become the mountain-*place* called "Timp"? A promotional campaign. In the 1910s and 1920s, boosters from Brigham Young University and its home city, Provo, announced their intention to create a new economy and new landmark — something on par with Portland, Ore., and Portland's Mount Hood. At Rotary

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Utah Lake near the former Geneva Steel plant.
IVAN MAKAROV

and Kiwanis Club meetings, they talked about "selling mountains" and "making scenery."

The boosters organized mass community hikes to what federal surveyors had determined — mistakenly, it turns out — to be the highest point in the Wasatch Range. The Annual Timpanogos Hike ran from 1912 to 1970. Boosters described it as the biggest hike in America and the largest "pilgrimage" to any mountain over 10,000 feet. They invented new names for the massif: the Wonder Mountain, the Wasatch Giant, King of the Wasatch, Monarch of the Mountains, Patriarch of the Mountains, Guardian of Utah Valley, Mount of the West, the Matterhorn of Utah.

Utahns worked so hard to convince outsiders of Timpanogos' pre-eminence that they came to believe it themselves. The surest sign of the boosters' success was their own eventual obsolescence. On the day of the 1922 annual hike, one of Provo's newspapers considered it necessary to print a full-banner front-page image of the mountain with an explanation: "THIS IS TIMPANOGOS — WONDER MOUNTAIN OF THE WASATCH RANGE." In 1997, the same paper redesigned its layout and adopted the mountain as its masthead — no caption necessary.

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While the rise of Mount Timpanogos didn't cause the decline of Utah Lake, there is a relationship — a dialectic — between the two: water and rock, low and high, production and recreation, displacement and place-making, history and folklore, remembering and forgetting.

Collective memory — a group's shared sense of the past — is primarily an act of forgetting. By the 1910s, when boosters began circulating "Indian legends" about the mountain, Utah Valley residents had all but forgotten the Lake People. And by the postwar era, few could recall the importance of Utah Lake to their pioneer ancestors.

Although the lake still occupied the floor of the valley, it no longer occupied the hearts and minds of valley people. Their genius loci had moved to higher ground. The Mormon hymnal is full of songs about "O ye mountains high," the "mountain of the Lord," "on Zion's mount," "for the strength of the hills," and "our mountain home so dear." There is nothing about the rivers and lakes of Zion, nothing about the Galilee of the West.

THIS NEGLECT is not the high country's fault. We should of course care about areas like Mount Timpanogos — kingly realms that touch the hem of heaven. It's no accident that our foundational national parks — Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, Rainier, Crater Lake, Glacier, Rocky Mountain — celebrated the highlands.

But that kind of love is easy. It's harder to love the unelevated, the unlovely, the downtrodden, the depauperate.

Utah Lake does not offer a "peak experience." It is shallow, turbid, unspectacular and polluted. Yet even in its current state — with PCB-laden carp making up 90 percent of the biomass — the lake remains a critically important wildlife habitat. It and the lower Provo River are far more ecologically important than the Mount Timpanogos Wilderness Area. Utah's watery namesake and its remaining native fish — especially the federally listed June sucker — deserve attention and repair.

The time is right. Geneva Steel closed in 2001; dismantling began in 2005. A developer has purchased the site. The greater lakefront represents the final real estate bonanza in Provo-Orem, one of the nation's fastest-growing metro areas. With more people living near the water, Utah Lake seems poised for renewal. A harbinger came in 2007, when Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman approved a cooperative agreement of nine lakeside cities. The resulting Utah Lake Commission is dedicated to improving the resource for people and wildlife. Building on this success, Huntsman signed an executive order in 2008 to create a Great Salt Lake Advisory Council.

The benefits of stewardship are more than environmental. There is a positive correlation between ecological consciousness and historical consciousness. By rehabilitating Utah's namesake lake, Utahns will recover an important part of their history, a history of Utes, and Mormons, and fish. Here and elsewhere, we will be better stewards of the past as well as better stewards of the Earth if we work from the bottom up.

Can Westerners turn their gaze from the lofty to the lowly? There are encouraging precedents from the Golden State. In 1994, after grassroots organizing, publicity work and litigation, the Mono Lake Committee secured legal agreements with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to restore Mono Lake. More recently, L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa presided over the ceremonial re-watering of the lower Owens River. The lake itself will not return — the city still siphons the water before it reaches the sink — but a rich riparian habitat is being restored. In Orange County, the California Department of Fish and Game recently opened Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve, a salt marsh that used to be an oil field. In San Francisco Bay, an ambitious multi-agency effort is under way to reclaim tidal marshes from salt ponds.

Other lowland restoration projects remain unresolved or underfunded. The Salton Sea, the Colorado River Delta, and the Sacramento River Delta rank among the most intractable problem spots in the West. So many stakeholders, so little water.

Like sediment, the effects of our choices accumulate downstream. They become concentrated. The lowdown places of the world — places like the Everglades and the Aral Sea, the Gulf Coast and the Tigris-Euphrates — are rich in cultural life and biodiversity, and they are full of injuries and possibilities. For restorationists, the stakes are highest here. The next New West will require the reinvention of reclamation — the practical art of place-repair. In a region blessed with so much magnificent high country, it's easy to look down on other places, and yet these overlooked landscapes may point the way. □